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THE PRC’S QUEST FOR GREAT POWER STATUS: A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the foreign policy outcomes of China’s fifteenth party congress to examine China’s potential as a great power in the long term. It argues that China’s capability as a great power in the short term tends to be overestimated but that this is also true of the long term. In its competition with the United States and other large regional powers for influence, constraints will remain on China’s capabilities in the long term that have not obtained and do not now obtain in the case of the US. (Nor did they exist to such an extent for the Soviet Union.) This does not mean that China will not be an important great power in the region. It clearly will be. It means that for a number of reasons canvassed in the paper it will be an incomplete one with important limits on the power that it could project.

Even so, although in the short term China’s national interests are served by pursuing a peaceful international environment, it could still impose substantial, and adverse, impacts on smaller countries in the region, should it wish to do so, through the exercise of its political and economic influence. In the long term, the worry would be that, even as an incomplete great power, it could demonstrate the arrogance reflected in the behaviour of other great powers.
THE PRC’S QUEST FOR GREAT POWER STATUS:
A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Stuart Harris

Foreign policy was not a central issue at the fifteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party but what it decided was important if only for reinforcing existing policy trends. China’s considerable pragmatism in international affairs was endorsed with the reaffirmation of Deng Xiaoping thought, extended by the endorsement of multilateralism, and facilitated by further moves back from ideology. Also significant was the strengthened position of Jiang Zemin, which also paved the way for the China–US summit and for his position on Taiwan Strait relations. Little has changed, however, in the issues underlying China’s quest for great power status.

There is no precision about what constitutes a ‘great power’. Traditionally, the term had a substantially European connotation, implying some role in the management of what then constituted the international system. Today we might describe that sense of a great power more generally as having international interests and a capacity to project (usually military) power to protect or advance those interests. Even so, changes in the international system require a more nuanced approach, as debate about Japan’s great power status illustrates. While, as well as its economic strength, that debate usually revolves around questions of Japan’s military power projection capability, in practice Japan’s difficulty in articulating a firm and consistent foreign policy is probably as important a qualification.

China already has many characteristics of a great power. It is one of the permanent five on the UN Security Council able to exercise a veto. It is one of five ‘legal’ nuclear powers. It has an ancient and internationally respected culture. It has a large and growing economy, is a major international trader and is an arms exporter. Its population size ensures that countries take into

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account its potential influence, and that China has to be considered in resolving any global problem.

Given all this, in many respects China might be said to already have many of the attributes of a great power. Nevertheless, although its Asian neighbours are increasingly respectful, not only does China not believe that it has the status that its characteristics should entitle it to but many non-Chinese observers would agree.

Chinese observers would generally accept that this reflects domestic and international reasons. The domestic reasons include its limited military capability; a low level of economic, social and political development; an inadequate level of technological sophistication that limits its industrial, including defence industrial, capacity; and a continuing concern for its ability to feed and improve living conditions for a large and growing population. It also has uncertainties not just about the social stability and political fragility of the Chinese nation but also about its identity.

The international reasons include what it perceives as a generally unfriendly and often threatening international environment. In particular, it feels subject to the unfriendly attention of a unipolar US, and often, by extension, US allies. Moreover, China was late in joining the international system and therefore was not involved in making the rules and formulating the norms that constitute an international system that suited the founding group’s interests but which may not suit China’s.

Now China needs to collaborate with the international system—in the UN, in arms control, in world trade, on the environment, over human rights—but in doing so ‘it ratifies US dominance and compromises its own freedom of action’ (Nathan and Ross 1997:xiii).

It would prefer not to have the US as the security ‘balancer’ in the region but it accepts that without that presence it could face a Japan military problem and an arms race among other Asian countries. It needs to open up internationally for economic and technological development but the more it does so the more vulnerable it is. It wants a stable international environment but is strategically vulnerable to the US, Japan and Russia as well as, potentially, to a unified Korea and even, in the longer term, India.

Consequently, it is a dissatisfied great power. So what can it, and will it, do in the short term and in the long term? Answers to these questions are part of the major debate about where China wants to go. Nathan and Ross see that the long experience of vulnerability may engender an urge ‘to take a turn at being a great power’ (Nathan and Ross 1997:34). The Economist believes that
given China’s recent history, it ‘is almost certainly ripe for a period of indignant reassertion’ (3 January 1998:18).

Realists in the West often judge China as wanting to achieve great power status by being increasingly assertive and aggressive. One well-publicised critique of the Chinese system argued that China is ‘an unsatisfied and ambitious power whose goal is to dominate Asia’ (Bernstein and Munro 1997). June Dreyer, like many others, sees it seeking to replace the US as the hegemonic power in Asia (cited in Hawkins 1997:16–17), whatever that means. Yet, despite the regional emphasis, China’s ambitions need to be seen in global and not just in regional terms since China undoubtedly has a global agenda.

Certainly, for outside observers, how its international policies will affect the balance of regional, and eventually world, power is crucial. The West is also interested in how adjustment to a rising ‘great power’ will be handled; analysts commonly point to the rise of Germany versus Britain as illustrating the inevitability of conflict (overlooking the relatively smooth transfer of power from Britain to a rising US).

Apart from questions about the validity or relevance of any or all influences on China of its history or culture, two important questions relate to China’s capabilities and its intentions. The first and perhaps most important is: can it in reality become a hegemon? This relates to capabilities. The second: is its goal to dominate Asia—and what does that imply? This relates to intentions.

We should also address a prior question: whom do we mean when we talk of China? Can one leader, or even a small group, any more determine China’s policy as Chiang, Mao and to a lesser extent Deng and small groups around them are largely judged to have done in the past? While the personal influence of leaders will not be negligible, and that is true of Jiang with his enhanced authority since the party congress, in China’s increasingly collective and institutionalised authoritarianism, China’s international policy is less subject to personal influence.

China’s policy is unlikely to return to its radical and unpredictable past, its foreign policy being increasingly determined by the nature and interests of the state. Relevant questions then, include how that collectivity defines those interests and sees them being advanced and how those decisions are made.

While institutionalising China’s foreign policy facilitates continuity and consistency, overt competition among various groups for influence in particular contexts has increased. Particularly when policies are in the discussion and
development stage, many statements by Chinese analysts will be part of the internal debate and should be assessed less from the perspective of what the statements say than why they were said.

**Capabilities**

Capabilities and intentions are obviously related. Intentions include overcoming basic constraints on capabilities. Ultimately, however, some constraints will remain as permanent limits within which intentions have to be shaped.

Debate continues more about the pace with which China could achieve a capacity to become a regional hegemon, about the military power that it will be able to exert regionally and about its likely ability to exercise global influence than about whether a dominant capability is feasible. In the regional context, given China’s size, economic importance and geographic location, it already has considerable strategic strength in relation to bordering countries on the Asian landmass: including Indochina, Myanmar, and central Asia. It has a strong strategic position on the Korean peninsula (where it is generally a stabilising influence). If we ignore the relative nuclear capabilities, this is also true to a degree along the China–Russia border.

Some analysts, however, see China’s military capability falling far short of a capacity to operate as a military hegemon in the mainly maritime region of the Asia–Pacific, which is what hegemonic projection of Chinese power would require. While this is recognised among China’s strategists, and some increase in China’s naval capability has resulted, the navy struggles for influence in an overwhelmingly land based military (Austin 1998:284). Robert Ross observed that the Soviet Union, a similarly land based power, had limited maritime power projection capabilities even at the peak of its military strength. In his view, the idea of China becoming a hegemon or having hegemonic capabilities in the next 30 years is not credible (1997a; see also Ross 1997b).

Nor does this appear currently a high priority for China (Yung 1996:48). China’s military preparations so far seem to fit only a sea-denial strategy. The PLA Navy (PLAN) is not equipped to be more than a coastal force (Yung 1996; see also Wilhelm 1996; Swaine 1998). Purchases of major up-to-date equipment items were limited until recently to four Russian-built Kilo class destroyers. More recently, following the events surrounding the March 1996 crisis over Taiwan, and China’s desire to protect its position in the seas around Taiwan, China has contracted for the purchase of two advanced Russian destroyers and has increased its purchases of Russian SU27 aircraft. Even with
its indigenous construction of surface combatants and fast attack craft and submarines (mostly falling short of up-to-date technologies), the PLAN’s capabilities will still not achieve an effective sea-denial capability for a considerable time ahead. Nor will the outstanding gaps be overcome simply through a continuation of China’s economic growth. Gaps remain, particularly in the PLA’s air component, and in its integrated logistic support, integrated combat systems and industrial and technological support. In addition, the PLA has to overcome deficiencies in basic maintenance skills and philosophies.

China threat arguments generally start from a belief that there has been a major increase in China’s military expenditure, and from China’s high profile purchases of sophisticated military equipment from Russia. In China’s modernisation processes, sizeable increases in real terms have been made in its military budget allocations, albeit from a low base. Although there have been many different estimates and assessments of its military modernisation effort, the most widely accepted estimate of real growth, that of the Central Intelligence Agency, was of some seven per cent a year in the five years to 1994, which has probably not changed much since then (USIS 1995).

The problem of transparency that exists in China’s military expenditures, in part intrinsic to China’s budgetary processes, such that the formal defence budget only covers current expenditures on pay, facilities and operations costs, may in due course be overcome. In the meantime, estimates of the off-budget elements, and of the extent of funds derived from the PLA’s own commercial activities, account for most of the differences among serious Western analysts. Recent research throws doubt on the contribution of the PLA’s commercial activities to China’s military modernisation being ‘as much a cash cow as Cheung 1997; see also Mulvenon 1997). More alarmist estimates also often fail to allow for, among other things, inflation, and include other factors such as inappropriate adjustments according to purchasing power parity comparisons.

They also commonly overlook a revenue constraint facing Beijing that is unlikely to be easily overcome. The revenue available to China’s central government has been declining as a proportion of GDP and is now around eleven per cent of total GDP. For most Western countries, the comparable figure is around twenty per cent or more. Beijing’s interest in resolving the

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2 It does not cover research and development, and weapons procurement, much of which is in the budgets of state enterprises in the defence industry. There seems to be a move to cover more of the procurement of domestically built weaponry out of the official defence budgets.
problem of state enterprises stems from the large drain they represent of budget outlays. Although for a while Beijing sought to pass these problems to the banks, this is now putting pressure on the financial system since the banks’ build up of unprofitable loans is coming under increasing international scrutiny.

These conclusions relate mostly to the decades immediately ahead. In the longer term, for China to catch up with countries such as the US or even to surpass Japan would require massive changes in China’s military organisation, and a significant shift in Chinese expenditure priorities. In making such changes, China would provide substantial strategic warning to other regional countries well ahead of time. It would, in any case, be immensely expensive; even the US is finding the prospective financial costs of the revolution in military affairs daunting.

There are other constraints. In addition to its many ocean borders, a number of which are contested, China has fourteen land borders, some of which remain problematic, and most of the bordering states differ in cultures, religions and political processes. The US has two land borders, essentially not contested. Although its problem of illegal migrants is serious, the US would be weaker and less able to exercise power globally, with a Russia, rather than a Canada, on its northern border and an India on its southern border instead of Mexico.

Although China has reasonable resource endowments, it will become a major importer of food and energy resources. The economic interdependence this implies gives China a significant incentive to operate cooperatively in the international system however much it may try to limit the vulnerability such interdependence provides.

China’s global agenda bears significantly upon its concerns about its territorial integrity, and particularly over Taiwan. China must put considerable effort into maintaining global support for its position on the ‘one-China’ policy. Its need to maintain this support against Taiwan’s continuing efforts to gain diplomatic recognition constrains its ability to influence international

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3 China does have the advantage of nuclear capability, which Japan does not although it is widely believed it could achieve this in a short period of time. Its navy, however, was judged in the early 1990s ahead of that of China as a very advanced and sizeable fleet compared with a very large but low in quality Chinese fleet (*Jane’s Defence Weekly* 11 April 1992:662–4; see also Commonwealth of Australia 1996:90–1). Little change in relativities has occurred as both continue to modernise.
issues and to take sides in international disputes. It must be even-handed in the Middle East, low key in the UN–Iraq dispute, and cautious over the Balkans, as over Kuwait. While its growing economic strength will provide added countervailing influence, not until it has resolved amicably the reunification with Taiwan would this constraint be overcome.

China’s quest for great power status will also depend on its domestic political situation. Greg Austin has observed that China faces a challenge to maintain regime legitimacy and domestic political authority as a result of just those changes that it has to make to support achievement of that status (1995). With the inevitably decentralising impact of economic development, its traditional basis of control diminishes while the social tensions associated with rapid economic change increase.

Problems of domestic political instability remain. Large-scale peasant or worker protests have been reported in Hubei, Jiangxi, Sichuan and Guandong provinces and a wider range of problems, acknowledged by the leadership, is reported from time to time (see, for example, Xie and Hua 1997; see also Pei 1998: particularly 79–81). One should not overemphasise these reports but social and political problems of unemployment and the consequences of reform of state owned enterprises are substantial and unlikely to improve quickly. Economic performance and social stability have become major legitimising factors in China, but for those not benefiting from economic growth, that legitimacy base does not exist and, if social stability seems in doubt, is undermined more widely.

In the long run, China’s capability to exercise hegemony in the region will be in competition with the US or be subject to competing influences of other major powers in the region. China’s ability to articulate and implement a firm and consistent foreign policy in a way that Japan cannot and, perhaps, the US as well when congress and the administration are at odds, will give China an advantage in exercising a great power role.

On the other hand, in competition with the US, China will have more constraints than the US, despite its obvious existing and growing strength. Even if, improbably, the US were to ‘withdraw’ from exercising its hegemonic role sometime in the future, China could not undertake that role with anything like the ease of the US.
**Intentions**

Many factors are cited as influencing China’s intentions. They include China’s wish to regain its historical ‘Middle Kingdom’ status; its wish to revenge 150 years of humiliation by the West; and its belief in the superiority of Chinese culture over that of the Western ‘barbarians’, linked perhaps to xenophobia. These factors are brought together in concerns about what is termed Chinese nationalism. A recent NDU strategic assessment talked of nationalism as a basis of China’s foreign policy (National Defence University 1997:chapter 4:4).

Questions of nationalism are complex and usually oversimplified. History has indicated that nationalism can be a powerful motivating factor. Many scholars consider it crucial in China’s experience in this century. It may now be a potentially unifying factor engendering loyalty to the idea of a Chinese nation and in maintaining regime legitimacy. Signs of assertive nationalism have surfaced in such issues as the dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu or Senkaku islands, in which Hong Kong and Taiwanese Chinese were vigorous participants. Some signs of economic nationalism against foreign investment are from time to time also encountered—genuine or stimulated.

Yet, in the international sphere, three qualifications are necessary. Nationalism, a symbolic concept, can be seen as an outcome of a shared culture that underpins community interactions by individuals with fellow nationals in a way that would not occur with non-nationals. It can take various forms. The main distinctions relevant here are between ethnic nationalism based on a presumed comparability of blood and race; and civic nationalism in which individuals subscribe to the political, economic and social system in which they live. Civic nationalism is usually seen as being based on equality, irrespective of ethnic, religious or other differences, within all aspects of that system. If under threat, civic nationalism will lead to a collective response to such a threat. This need not, however, become an aggressive nationalism, and not an aggression based on ethnicity. This is the stated objective of Chinese policy although how far it holds in practice is unclear.

Second, there are normally multiple patterns of alignment. China is not mono-ethnic. To a degree, its authoritarianism supports an ethnic majority domination by the Han Chinese, but the concept of Han Chinese oversimplifies the question of ethnic differences in China and their political significance (Gladney 1995). Even were China mono-ethnic, however, nationalism ‘is not the only character on the ideological scene’ (Gellner 1994:viii). People are not just nationalists but have other loyalties or drives: to religion, to traditional
institutions such as the family and clan, to regional collectivities, or to economic motivations and modernising ideas, all relevant in China.

Third, nationalism is a construct that can be developed or used if leaders want to do so. Yet that is not always successful or controllable. In practice, nationalism and government objectives in China or elsewhere commonly are at odds rather than consistent. While nationalist concerns exist over Taiwan, although improbably over the South China Sea, the Chinese government knows from experience that nationalist groundswells can legitimise dissent from the governing regime. Hence their caution over PRC nationals’ involvement in the Senkakus dispute, which was in any case inconsistent with the regime’s self identification as a country that settles disputes peacefully by negotiation.

National identity and nationalism, although different and coming from different directions, are linked since the closer they are the more predictable the future actions of the government. There are real questions, however, as to how China identifies itself. China faces a long historical problem of establishing its identity that, while based largely on territorial integrity, also embraces cultural and, to a degree, racial identity. In part, in China’s view, this involves ensuring the return of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (however nominal the latter), and not having to be concerned about Tibet, Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia. Many argue that China will be aggressive and expansionist, wanting to recover territory previously part of the Chinese ‘empire’. Yet, although Bernstein and Munro believe China wants to dominate the region, they accept that China ‘does not covet its neighbours’ territory—except for the unique case of Taiwan’ (Bernstein and Munro 1997:208).

The influence of Chinese history and perhaps culture will remain important, if only symbolically. How it affects intentions is not clear, however, other than establishing an assumption of China’s entitlement to great power status, a continuing concern for its security, and an intention to achieve international respect and what it judges to be equality of treatment.

China’s identity may have been clear when it was a revolutionary regime and to some extent a proselytising one. It was also at that stage a third world state, seeing itself as the leader of the third world. To some extent it holds to that claim but with decreasing validity. Now, however, it has shifted from a

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4 Leaders and élites largely determine national identity; nationalism tends to come up from the popular level.
radical ideology, and to a degree has eschewed ideology altogether. It has also moved from international isolation to active participation in the international system. Consequently, there is wide agreement that it is searching now for an identity, if predominantly in the domestic sphere. There are also internal debates about how far integration with the international system means ‘Westernisation’ and the loss of China’s national identity.

Domestically, China’s identity of late has been based as much on its socialist identity as on its Chinese characteristics. It was a socialist state and still refers to itself as being at the primary stage of socialism. That it accepts that reaching the final stage may take a very long time, ‘at least a century’, suggests that the leadership wants to retain the credentials while ignoring them in practice. Having gone, however, from a central planning to an increasingly market oriented economy, and from ideology to substantial pragmatism, and with rapid shifts in values and beliefs, its identity problem is unsurprising.

Internationally, were it possible to be clear about China’s national identity, defined by Bob Scalapino as how it perceives the essence of the nation in relation to others (Scalapino 1993:215–16), it might ‘provide a reasonable basis for expectations concerning that nation’s future comportment’ (Dittmer and Kim 1993:31). At least it might tell us what the leaders would see as its interests, given that collectively they articulate the national identity.

On the surface China could be judged to be participating in the international system as a modernising nation-state—something involving a significant change for it. Emphasis is often put on its holding firmly to nation-state attributes: sovereignty, including, understandably in the light of its history, non-interference in its internal affairs; and the preservation of its independence, a concern reinforced in China’s mind by its unhappy and relatively recent experience of dependence upon the Soviet Union. That emphasis on sovereignty is often cited as singularly characteristic of China, yet it is hardly more so than of the US. In practice, however, China has accepted some constraints on sovereignty that globalisation and participation in the international system require. These range from China’s acceptance of the conditionality applied by the International Monetary Fund in its loans to China, to recognising a valid international interest in China’s human rights.

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5 At the 15th party congress, Jiang put state-to-state relations ahead of party-to-party relations, involving a substantial downgrading of ideology (Jiang Zemin’s Report 1997).

6 China’s reluctance to develop too close relations with other countries is elaborated in Harding (1994).
How China sees its objectives being achieved

China’s stress in recent years of its interest in a peaceful international environment was re-emphasised by Jiang at the fifteenth party congress, while noting China’s concern at undue international dependence. Particularly interesting in Jiang’s report to the congress was the weight given to Deng Xiaoping thought with, in its foreign policy context, concern for independence and peaceful diplomacy, and the continuity of Deng’s ‘good neighbour’ policy.

Deng’s five principles—no yielding to outside pressure; no allying with big powers or blocs; no developing military blocs; no part in an arms race; and no military expansion—were rhetorical statements but they were followed to a considerable extent by Deng when in power. He was responsible for China’s opening up to the world, for the normalisation with the US and the resumption of relations with the USSR, and the elaboration of the ideas of one country two systems with respect to Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Of course, China fought many of its neighbours during recent decades, and Deng was responsible for the decision to teach the Vietnamese a lesson in the late 1970s. Force remained an accepted weapon in China’s diplomatic armoury, but China’s use of force was normally for what China perceived to be defensive purposes. Moreover, Deng was responsible for what was generally accepted as a constructive agreement with Britain on Hong Kong. China has since successfully negotiated border issues with its many neighbours, with considerable success in dampening down conflicts if not necessarily resolving its problems, and making China more secure than for over a century. On balance, following Deng’s philosophy brought Chinese foreign policy closer to the norms the international community claims to follow.

During the Sino-US summit, Jiang said he wanted to handle Sino-US relations from a long term strategic perspective, to look for common interests and see things from the other’s viewpoint, to stick by the three , to handle differences with mutual respect and equality, and to handle the Taiwan issue properly.

Jiang Zemin was pleased the US agreed to ‘build towards a strategic partnership’ and this is now incorporated in the official Chinese discourse. This is despite China’s desire for broadening the exercise of international power, and for a shift from unipolarity to global multipolarity. Encouraging multipolarity is a means by which China sees its quest for great power status advanced. Hence its move to closer relations with Russia, care in maintaining the Japan relationship, and as an added motivation for its links with Europe. Yet, in seeking closer US relations, to match its increasing interdependence
with the US, China may have accepted that any substantial degree of multipolarity is not feasible for a considerable time.

While China tries to reassure the world of its peaceful intent, sceptics say that its seeming constructive attitude is window dressing, that the Chinese are concealing their real intentions and that one should look for the hidden agenda. Of course, all countries conceal to some extent their true intentions but, despite the occasional ‘boilerplate’ presentation by an elderly military leader, a desire for a peaceful international environment is not surprising. It is in China’s interest at this time to avoid international tensions and to cooperate internationally to develop its economic potential through modernisation. There are valid questions, however, about the longer term, an issue to which we return.

In the meantime, in addition to China’s stated intentions, as in most countries we need to compare them with what they have done in practice, considering as well why they do it. This is a better guide for China since our understanding of their policy making processes is limited.

Given the history of international attitudes to China and the condensation into a period of around a quarter of a century a process of development that took other countries immensely longer, China’s progress is substantial and largely consistent in its move towards integration into the global system. Starting from its re-entry into UN membership, China has joined most of the international organisations and now participates in most of the international regimes and institutions.

Realists would argue, addressing particularly China’s membership of the international economic organisations, that China belongs because it gives it financial, technological and scientific inputs to its economic modernisation, but that it does not support the legitimacy of these organisations. Once it joins, and its great power status is more assured, it will want to shape the regimes that the institutions represent more to its liking. This has been the pattern of traditional great powers, and perhaps not all that unreasonable.

In practice this is not apparent so far and it also begs the question of China’s intentions. It assumes that they differ so substantially from the intentions of those already in the system that they could not be achieved by participating within the generality of norms and values of the international system in the political as well as the economic field. These include support for the UN, arms control, peaceful dispute settlement, support for cooperative regimes and the like.

For those comfortable with the status quo, the wish to maintain it is understandable. Yet that status quo has been far from unchanging, the US and
other major powers (and where feasible Australia) seeking continually to adapt and adjust these regimes to ensure the international rules and norms and their implementation cohere with their national interests. Indeed, not only does the West, as David Lampton observes for the US, often confuse ‘its own policy preferences with international norms’ (Lampton 1997:130), but the failures on the part of many members to adhere to these norms are conveniently overlooked. While China can be criticised for managing to have its contribution to the UN reduced to less than one per cent of total contributions despite having one fifth of the veto power (Lampton 1997:133), the US, with rather more influence, remains unwilling to pay its outstanding dues.

A realist view that China’s relatively conforming behaviour is a temporary phase is not inconsistent with saying that countries can learn. It implies that any such learning is simply adaptive learning—how to adapt to China’s own needs and the requirements of the international environment but with no change in their world view.

An alternative view is that countries are capable of learning cognitively and not just adaptively, and can change their view of the world. The process of learning is complex and there are different opinions and concepts in the literature on the subject, mostly coming out of relations with the Soviet Union (see, for example, Tetlock 1991). The evidence in practice is strong that a process of learning has occurred at the level of individuals, institutions and government involved in China’s foreign policy process.

This is most evident in China’s experience with the international economic system. Given that the role of military power has diminished relative to economic and what Joseph Nye called soft power, as the basis for international influence, this has particular interest in the China context. In the economic field, China underwent a major learning process subsequent to its economic opening in the late 1970s. The idea of global interdependence, increasingly apparent in the discourse of China’s leaders from the mid-1980s, is contrary to what had been Chinese political culture for many centuries and the world view that that reflected. This change in the discourse did not come from a decision at the top reflecting adaptive learning but from a basic shift in understanding. In part it could be attributed to the global socialisation roles played by international institutions (Kim 1994:433–4). In part, it was due to an

Moreover, the US has not signed many of these international arrangements—ranging from the law of the sea to many human rights conventions.
extensive internal debate in China that moved Chinese thinking towards a new world view.

In this process, Chinese policy thinkers and leaders abandoned many deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of the international economic environment. They saw the old and new world orders as historical categories in a relative sense and the new international order as in conformity with the objective needs of the development of modern productive forces. Acknowledging this higher stage of economic development that needed more than national markets, they came to accept and internalise the reality of one world market with capitalism as the prevailing force (at the core?) and with the need for economic cooperation globally and regionally. Among the specific changes in thinking was that, following intensive study, they concluded that trade, rather than being exploitative as their formulation from Marx had indicated, could be mutually beneficial (see, for example, Ma 1986).

Not all of the changes in approach have come from a sophisticated understanding of global interdependence, nor have all those with influence accepted the new views, anymore than they have elsewhere. But there was a rapid shift in China’s participation in international economic organisations. Moreover, China seems willing to accept the costs as well as the benefits of global interdependence, as in its participation in APEC, although like other countries it sometimes argues about the costs, as in its efforts to join the World Trade Organisation. Nevertheless, where it has been accepted within such institutional arrangements, its role has been constructive and any changes it has sought have been gradual and non-disruptive (Jacobsen and Oksenberg 1990; Harris 1997).

In security issues, China has tended to move more cautiously. Yet among the Chinese academics and think tanks, there is extensive discussion of the ‘new’ approach to security emphasising interdependence, common interests and a widening of the concept of security. In the regional context, it had initially seen multilateral security discussions as potentially designed to constrain China, as was true to a degree of its global attitudes to particular arms control mechanisms. Like the US, it preferred bilateral approaches, but it did, somewhat reluctantly, join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It now accepts that such dialogue encourages the US and Japan as well as China in regional cooperative behaviour. At the fifteenth party congress, only a few

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8 A useful summary of the main points of the argument can be found in ‘China’ (1998), and ‘Army Paper’ (1998).
years on, China endorsed formally, for the first time, multilateralism and stressed the need for China to participate actively in multilateral forums.

At the global level, China has participated increasingly in UN activities, its contributions including a peacekeeping contingent serving efficiently under an Australian UN commander in Cambodia. It is providing Chinese participants in the UN inspection teams in Iraq. China has also moved substantially in accepting much of Western thinking on arms control, despite its traditional security paranoia, and its being excluded from rule-making for many of these arrangements. It was a signatory to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (and, unlike the US and Russia, has not pursued sub-critical testing exercises, thought by many to breach the spirit, if not the letter, of the treaty). It has accepted for some time that non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is in China’s interest. A signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite its imbalance for developing countries, it supported making the treaty permanent. It was an original signatory to the chemical weapons convention and is a party to the biological weapons convention. It has supported US efforts on North Korea and has joined the Zanger committee on exports of nuclear technology.

Although it has accepted certain commitments under Missile Technology Control Regime, there are still differences with the US, notably over exports of missiles and parts but given the ambiguities over those issues it is difficult to make judgements about that. More clearly, despite improvements in many areas of human rights in China, it has not met all the obligations it has accepted under international agreements to which it has adhered. There are also important questions about how far Beijing’s writ can run in administering its adherence to its international commitments, even when it enters into such agreements in good faith.

In putting China’s international behaviour under the microscope, it is possible to find what is being looked for—to find either that the glass is half empty or is half full. A major problem is the criteria against which we judge its activity internationally. Samuel Kim (1994), James Feinerman (1995), David Lampton (1997) and others who have written on the subject tend to compare performance against the specifics of agreements—and often find gaps in performance. Perhaps it would be more reasonable to compare with what other great powers actually do: Britain’s flouting of UN sanctions against South Africa; French bombing of the Greenpeace vessel in New Zealand; the US mining of harbours in Central America; and Russia attacking Chechnya; all seen as great powers doing what great powers ‘have to do’. On these criteria
the judgement on China might be less critical, but in a sense potentially more worrying.

If we accept that learning has taken place such that China now understands that closer integration in the international community is in its national interest and therefore supports its quest for great power status or, indeed, reflects its recognition of its responsibility as an emerging great power, what else will it learn? Will it learn that great powers do not always adhere to the international rules and norms, often change the rules, and that unilateral action by those in the in-group is not seen as reprehensible?

Finally, given the importance of learning in influencing international policies and defining national interests, it becomes important who makes foreign policy, and what are the major influences. It is generally accepted that an important influence is that of the PLA. Here, however, I will limit myself to asking what differences would arise were the PLA to determine the path of China’s quest for great power status? It is often suggested that it would be more assertive and aggressive on many issues. Even assuming, improbably, that it was monolithic in its views, that is often not certain. Moreover, there are reasons for thinking the influence of the presumably softer line ministry of foreign affairs has increased significantly.

If we assume that the PLA seeks hardline solutions, then they have been remarkably unsuccessful. Certainly, on some smaller issues as over joint exercises in the ARF confidence-building processes, or in joining the land mine convention, the PLA has prevailed, at least temporarily. Yet military modernisation has achieved limited priority in budget outcomes. On Taiwan, the PLA’s influence is assumed to be strong. Yet Jiang’s relatively conciliatory eight points remain in place and recent moves suggest an even softer line, whatever the rhetoric over particular activities of the Nationalists on Taiwan. The Chinese position on the South China Sea in discussions with ASEAN has been moderate, illustrated in the joint China–ASEAN December 1997. Moreover, in the arms control arena generally, much of the progress in China’s participation is contrary to what were understood to have been PLA views in the past.

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9 This is discussed at length in Joffe (1998).
10 China and ASEAN agreed to resolves disputes through peaceful means without resorting to the threat or use of force and to settle disputes in the South China Sea through friendly consultation and negotiations ‘in accordance with universally recognised international law’ (Text of Joint Statement 1997; see also Far Eastern Economic Review 8 January 1998:32).
Endnote

This paper has been concerned with long term aspects of China’s quest for great power status, and what the outcomes of the fifteenth party congress implied for that. The overall impact of the congress outcome was to reinforce the existing trends in China’s international relations policies, which have tended to integrate China more closely into the international system. While this is positive, for the longer term, some key issues are:

- China is already a great power, and what we are considering is a question of the degree to which its present status reflects its potentiality. It no doubt aspires to a pre-eminent position in the region such that it will be able to protect and assert its interests in competition, particularly, with the US. If so, it is undoubtedly a less than satisfied power but its great power capability will remain incomplete for a considerable period.

- China’s size and the growth of its economy, which will in any case almost certainly increase in size substantially, even if unevenly, already give it certain advantages, as does its capacity to articulate a relatively consistent foreign policy.

- On the other hand, China’s many domestic constraints will limit its ability to play a dominant great power role. It has a long way to go for reality to match the full range of its possible aspirations as a great power. Lee Kuan Yew’s suggestion that it may take as much as fifty years for China to match Europe or Japan let alone the US, whatever the qualifications needed, offers a useful perspective (Lee 1998).

- In the meantime, the capabilities of other major regional powers will also grow in influence. China will continue to have indefinite limits on its ability to exercise the kind of dominance in Asia that the US currently can and will exercise for some considerable time. Those limits will include its interest in ensuring that other regional great powers do not combine in opposition to it.

- As well as its large number of, often problematic, land borders, these limits will include the major constraints on its maritime power projection capability.

- China’s global influence has, in one sense, been increased by its acquisition of Hong Kong, including the constraints that puts on Western pressure, but it also limits its freedom of action for face, as well as economic, reasons. In particular, however, it will be constrained in its capacity to exercise global influence while the need to retain global support for its Taiwan position remains.

- At the same time, in the new international context in which military power is less important relative to other sources of influence, China will be increasingly able to exercise economic and political influence. Its ability to
provide the bases of popular culture, societal attraction, technological innovation and lifestyle that add up to soft power will, however, take longer to develop.

• In what will be a relatively long short term, China’s intentions will reflect its interest in avoiding international tension. There is evidence, however, not just that it is behaving cooperatively because international cooperative behaviour is in China’s national interest, but is doing so in part because of a changed understanding of the way the world works.

• In the long term, how China will participate in the international system will depend in part upon how far its cognitive learning proceeds. It will also depend upon how the rest of the world responds by accommodating equitably to what China feels it is entitled to in the exercise of its great power status, while accepting that there will be differences in their respective assessments.

• The dangers for the region are twofold. First, that since cognitive learning can take different directions, adverse global responses can lead to negative learning, and increase the influence in China of those antagonistic to international cooperation. Second, history would suggest that the inevitable accretion of power will lead to the usual response to the holding of power—an arrogant assertion of that power. This view will not necessarily be countered by the imperfect record of behaviour of existing great powers in complying with international rules and norms.

In foreign policy terms, then, the fifteenth party congress kept the Chinese polity on the largely constructive path set out for it by Deng Xiaoping. It is still, however, only at an early point in a long and winding road in its quest for great power status.
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