

The Debate on China's Grand Strategy

Written by Lukas K. Danner.

In the past couple of years a heated debate on what China's grand strategy is, or should be, has flared up among academics and policy analysts. With the so-called rise of China, and with an allegedly rising assertiveness on China's part since 2008, its grand strategy has come into focus even more. The question on everyone's mind is whether China actually has a cohesive grand strategy, and whether incoherence could be a sign of China being in the process of changing to another grand strategic course.

Grand strategy refers to a country's general foreign and security policy and determines how a country projects itself on the world stage. Isolationism would be an example of a grand strategy which is extremely inward-looking, while imperialism is an example of outward facing grand strategy. Grand strategies are the privilege of the most important powers in the international system to which China certainly belongs.

The Chinese government has emphasized a grand strategy focusing on "Peaceful Development", a vision set out in two white papers in 2005 and 2011, previously articulated as "Peaceful Rise".

"Peaceful Development" was not a completely novel idea and strategists like Zheng Bijian have heavily borrowed from Deng Xiaoping's twenty-four-character foreign policy doctrine of which the most prominently remembered phrase remains "conceal one's capacities and bide one's time, keep a low profile". The key internationally relevant goals of this grand strategy are defending Chinese territorial integrity, reunifying China, and resolving territorial disputes. Of lesser importance are following a policy of anti-hegemonism, maintaining an international environment favorable to economic growth in China and avoiding creating the perception that China is a threat to international security. Ultimately the goal is to rise to great power status.

With the onset of the Global Financial Crisis 2008 and after, Chinese decision-makers seem to have somewhat changed their perception of China's capabilities relative to a seemingly declining U.S. China feels less compelled to conceal its capacities and bide its time, and is convinced that China's time has come. This is what inspired the debate on China's rising assertiveness which in turn also influenced the present debate on the nature and course of its grand strategy.

There are several different viewpoints about China's grand strategy represented by different factions. First, some scholars believe that China either has no grand strategy and is still in search of one, or is merely acting pragmatically. Second, there is an argument that China does have a grand strategy but it is a contradictory one. Third, some observers have argued that it is not in China's culture to have one coherent grand strategy but rather to seek a middle way. And fourth, China may be shifting from "Peaceful Development" to another grand strategy.

The first group of scholars think of China as either having no grand strategy or that its grand strategy is to be pragmatic. These scholars are grouped together since to "be pragmatic" implies ad hoc adjustments and a lack of consistency, which means there is no "grand strategy." Many policy scholars believe that China is a pragmatic power practicing *realpolitik*. Opposed to this would be most theoretical scholars who argue that every great power has a grand strategy—no matter if it is concealed or proclaimed, and no matter if it is contradictory or cohesive. Eric Hyer with his recent published book *The Pragmatic Dragon* (2015) would be a representative of this group.

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The second group believes that China does have a grand strategy but that it is contradictory. Barry Buzan recently published "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy," and Denny Roy equally aligned himself with this strand of the debate in "China's Grand Strategy Not Absent, Just Contradictory." The contradictions that they see are, for example, China claiming to engage in foreign relations promoting international peace yet showing no hesitance in utilizing hard power capabilities in territorial disputes, while continuously increasing its military budget.

The third strand of the debate emphasizes the distinctiveness of Chinese culture. While Western powers may have one single grand strategy, China has developed very differently in its long history and thus its worldview is not the same. Qin Yaqing may be said to be the spearhead of this group explaining such an argument in his recent "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy." Qin's approach highlights the cultural importance of China being inclined to using the "middle way" between two strategies, always having a grand strategy in flux.

Yan Xuetong's "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement" is an example for the fourth strand, arguing that China should change, is in the process of changing, or has already changed its grand strategy from "Peaceful Development" to something else. In Yan's case that is "Striving for Achievement," a more active international strategy. Wang Jianwei and Chen Dingding call for a lighter version of this calling it "Selective Leadership," i.e., a grand strategic approach that is not quite as active as that suggested by Yan.

Whether we are witnessing a dramatic shift in China's grand strategy remains to be seen. Recent developments like the foundation of the AIIB and the "One Road, One Belt" strategy, as well as rising assertiveness in territorial disputes since the late 2000's may or may not be a sign that China is slowly becoming a more outward-looking and more active stakeholder in international politics.

Lukas K. Danner is a PhD student in Politics and IR at Florida International University. He is a CPI Blog emerging scholar. Image Credit: CC by Ronald Sarayudej/Flickr