

Rising Assertiveness Versus Peaceful Development: Making Sense of China's Ambivalent International Behavior¹

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Abstract

In the past few years, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis, China has become more assertive, not just in its military posture but also in its diplomatic affairs and economic interactions. Despite this rising assertiveness, China's grand strategy officially remains that of 'Peaceful Development.' In consequence, scholars have disagreed about the trajectory of China's grand strategy in light of its often ambivalent behavior. To explain this ambivalence, this article will take a closer empirical look at two important developments regarding China's international affairs: The softening on China's preoccupation with territorial integrity and sovereignty has been exhibited in taking sides with Russia in the Ukraine Crisis, as well as its continually increasing participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions. In contrast to more common materialist explanations, this article argues that the ambivalence of these actions can best be explained by contextualizing them with China's history and sense of legitimacy.

Keywords

China, Grand Strategy, Peaceful Development, Ukraine Crisis, Peacekeeping Missions.

Introduction

The rise of China has been a much discussed development in the recent past. The 2008 global financial crisis which started in the U.S. has certainly contributed to the change in the Chinese perception that the American-led, unipolar, post-Cold War international order was in decline. For many scholars, this change in perception has triggered a more assertively acting China. This article deals with China's 'grand strategy,' or its international policy - an approach which originated in the late 1990s and was primarily promoted by Chinese policy advisor Zheng

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

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Bijian.³ The more China has grown, the more its grand strategy has come into focus in policy-making and academic circles. ‘Peaceful Development’ (PD) has been the chosen course for China’s grand strategy as it seeks to ascend the ranks of the great power circle to which it belonged for millennia until the ‘Century of Humiliation’ and its aftermath (ca. 1839-1945). In the recent past, especially after 2008, China has become more assertive in its actions and has begun to pursue its goals more aggressively and less introspectively than before. This article positions itself within the debate on the coherence of China’s grand strategy that has resulted from these recent actions.⁴ Whereas most other explanations rely on power transition theory or other material explanations, this article attempts to solve the puzzle innovatively through a cultural inquiry focusing on China’s preoccupation with gaining back the honor that it lost at the hands of the West and Japan during the ‘Century of Humiliation.’ In the words of Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, who identified fear, interest, and honor as the driving forces of international relations, this article will focus on the intangible driving force of honor to explain this allegedly contradictory behavior of China in its grand strategy - rather than the tangible forces of fear (related to the military) or interest (related to the economy).⁵

The analysis is going to zero in on two important events in China’s grand strategy in the past few years: on the one hand, the retreat from insisting on non-interference in internal affairs and the sanctity of territorial integrity exhibited in the Ukraine crisis since 2014, and on the other hand, the increasing participation of China in United Nations peacekeeping missions. For both cases, the analysis is going to lay out a detailed course of events, establish the relation to honor and legitimacy, determine whether China actually diverged from its grand strategic course of PD in the given case, and present alternative explanations along the lines of fear or economic interest. In order to establish divergence from or convergence with PD, seven important factors were extracted from PD, i.e., (1) defense of territorial integrity, (2) increasing of China’s power, (3) the paradigm of ‘anti-hegemonism,’ (4) maintaining a favorable economic market, (5) showing international responsible behavior, (6) avoiding others to see China as a threat, and (7) generally improving China’s reputation.⁶

The Retreat from Non-Interference in Internal Affairs During the Ukraine Crisis

Russia has historically been both a competitor and a strategic ally to China. The resolution of territorial disputes with Russia is relatively recent, though the creation of an independent

³ See Zheng (2005), pp. 18-24. ‘Peaceful Rise’ was later renamed to ‘Peaceful Development’ due to the more implicit aggression in the concept of ‘rise’ compared to the then more positive ‘development’ with a more economic connotation.

⁴ See, e.g., Buzan (2014); Chen (2014); Qin (2014); Yan (2014).

⁵ Needless to say, this article does not argue that fear and interest do not drive China’s international behavior and grand strategy. Rather, it argues that the at times seemingly contradictory behavior can best be explained by focusing the analysis on honor and intangible, non-materialist aspects, such as historical memory and legitimacy.

⁶ This article generally follows Buzan’s identification of most important factors of the Peaceful Development grand strategy. For further reading on ‘Peaceful Development,’ see Buzan (2014); Zheng (2005); or China’s White Papers on this grand strategy, i.e., *China’s Peaceful Development* (2011); available at: <http://in.chineseembassy.org/eng/zt/peaceful/t855717.htm>; and *China’s Peaceful Development Road*, (2005); available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN023152.pdf>.

Mongolia and the retaining of Northeastern territories bordering Heilongjiang province are still an irritation for China. Even during ideological convergence in Cold War times, and to a certain extent also today, Russia and China's relations continue to be both cooperative and sometimes conflictual.

China's strong emphasis on territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference of one country in another's internal affairs have been a hallmark of its foreign policy approach as well as an important factor in its Peaceful Development grand strategy. Upholding the non-interference norm, sometimes said to be the Golden Rule in the Law of Nations, means that China has to act accordingly and be persistent in its international behavior and reactions to other countries' interference with each other's internal affairs and violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Against this background, it was a surprise to many observers that China reacted as it did in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict over Crimea, as well as the eastern Ukrainian provinces around the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk. As exemplified by the statements of some diplomats representing China as well as the absence of a condemnation, China implicitly took the side of Russia in this international maneuver, in which Crimea joined the Russian Federation as a new republic and the eastern Ukrainian provinces may or may not be drawn into the Russian orbit, short of full autonomy from Kiev, even though this is not supported by the Minsk peace process.⁷ Thus, China's reaction to this event (i.e., not persisting in its stand that non-interference in others' internal affairs is paramount in international law) is a major divergence from its grand strategy. Some of the analysts that often suspect a 'China threat' for neighboring countries were already predicting a major shift in China's policy, to result in China emulating this Russian model of acquiring claimed territory. China was thus compelled to publicly announce that it would not do so.⁸

Detailed Course of Events of the Ukraine Case

As explained earlier, China has a long tradition of taking the side of countries that have been the victims of sovereignty infringement, especially in regard to the non-interference in internal affairs and the territorial integrity of any country. Sean Kay (2015, 125) writes on China's history concerning this kind of behavior:

Chinese officials also view American intervention in other countries - for instance, during the Kosovo and Iraq wars - with concern that the United States is setting new precedents regarding

⁷ See, e.g., Global Times (2014), Tiezzi (2014a), Tiezzi (2014b), RT (2014), or Presidency of Uzbekistan in SCO (2016) for Russia- or neutrality-leaning arguments. For arguments which are Ukraine-leaning, see Alpert (2014) or Economy (2014). It needs to be said, though, that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did stay neutral and emphasized that they respected Ukraine's sovereignty. Nevertheless, the absence of condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea is striking, and, in international law, the absence of an objection ('persistent objector') is, after all, significant.

⁸ See Zhang (2015).

sovereignty with possible implications for Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang Province. Conversely, China was not impressed with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, which grossly violated Ukrainian sovereignty.

Thus, China's ambiguity on the Ukraine crisis came as quite a shock to many observers of China's international behavior over the last several years, particularly in light of China's emphasis on territorial sovereignty in its own grand strategy. China's behavior seems to follow balance-of-power approaches, in which the West and East confront each other again as adversaries, just as they did during the Cold War. This ambiguity can be seen in the following:

We hope relevant parties will exercise restraints and make efforts to ease the situation rather than further escalate it. The relevant conflicts must be resolved through diplomatic means on the basis of taking into account the interests of all parties. We advocate the establishment of the mechanism of international contacts to seek a political solution under the framework of law and order. (China 2014a)

Moreover, a Sino-Russian deal to which both parties agreed during a May 2014 visit, in which China secured large quantities of oil and gas from Russia in addition to other areas of economic cooperation, could give the impression that China received a pay-off for taking Russia's side, ultimately taking advantage of economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the aftermath of its annexation of Crimea. This impression was prevalent at least the first couple of months after the crisis. Balancing this, a few months later China invested heavily in Ukraine and "Kyiv [increasing] its agricultural trade with Beijing by more than 50 percent" (Sieren 2015).

As mentioned above, after the Crimean annexation by Russia, China was able to strike a gas supply deal with Russia in May 2014, likely meant to counter or at least alleviate the sanctions set on Russia by the West, in addition to economically benefitting China:

The effects of U.S. policy have been all too apparent as Russian-Chinese cooperation has accelerated rapidly since March 2014. With regard to overall political relations, during his state visit to Shanghai in May, Putin gushed that bilateral interactions had become the 'best in all their many centuries of history.' Striking also was the Russian president's frequent use of the term 'alliance,' albeit not with reference to military ties. In addition to this positive rhetoric, it was during the May trip that Russia and China finally signed their mammoth 30-year, \$400 billion gas deal. After more than ten years of inconclusive negotiations, it seems that Western sanctions helped break the impasse by pushing Russia to accept China's price terms. (Brown 2015)

This move could be interpreted as China taking advantage of Russia's weakened economic position due to the economic sanctions against it. However, as presented in the media, the particular timing of the closing of the deal with Russia (during the height of international pressure and shaming campaigns on Russia) does give the impression of China taking Russia's side in this conflict. It also allowed Russia to continue its Siberia and Asia pivot, reducing reliance on the EU as its major economic partner.

In late February 2015, the Chinese ambassador to Belgium, Qu Xing, “call[ed] on the West to ‘abandon its zero-sum mentality’ [and] (...) said the West should take ‘the real security concerns of Russia into consideration’” (Boren 2015). Furthermore, he found:

that the nature and root cause of [the] Ukraine crisis was the game between Russia and western powers, including the United States and the European Union. ‘There were internal and external reasons for the Ukraine crisis. Originally, the issue stemmed from Ukraine’s internal problems, but it now was not a simple internal matter. Without external intervention from different powers, the Ukrainian problem would not develop into the serious crisis as it be (*sic*) [.]’ (...) On the one hand, China and Ukraine are traditional friendly countries. China has always pursued the principles of non-interference, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. And on the other hand, China acknowledges that the issue involved complicated historical elements. (Sun 2015)

The Chinese ambassador’s allusion to the paradox between pursuing non-interference and territorial integrity and certain historical elements is particularly striking in this *Xinhua* article.

Until recently, the situation left two powerful actors, the EU and Russia, continuing to fight over the Ukraine’s allegiance without any real success. Neither the EU nor Russia can now be said to have the whole of Ukraine under their sphere of influence. True to the proverb of ‘When two people quarrel, a third rejoices,’ China seems to have actually emerged as a winning actor from the Ukraine crisis. On the one hand, as mentioned, Russia came as a junior partner to a deal with the Chinese, with a planned cooperation concerning oil and gas access for the Chinese at favorable prices. On the other hand, it was not only the Russians who were forced to decrease their prices; “Ukrainians have had to offer favorable prices, [too,] sometimes giving discounts of up to 50 percent on purchases from agricultural companies” (Sieren 2015), of which China took advantage. Over the past few years, China’s relations with Ukraine have grown tighter and more important:

In 2012 Ukraine became the fourth-largest arms exporter in the world, with many of those exports going to China. Beijing’s first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, was built in Ukraine. Ukraine agreed [in 2013] to a deal for China to lease five percent of the country’s land to grow crops and raise pigs for sale to Chinese state-owned companies. As part of that deal China promised to build highways and bridges in the country. China also pledged \$8 billion in aid during ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s visit to Beijing in December [2013]. That was in addition to \$10 billion China had previously given to the country. (Van Sant 2014)

Given China’s significant investments in Ukraine, the on-going conflict between Ukraine and Russia is of course far from ensuring their security.

Localization of the Ukraine Case in Terms of Honor and Legitimacy

As presented above, the obsession with sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in others’ internal affairs stems from China’s experience with the intrusion of the Western powers (plus Japan) in its territory - the so-called ‘Century of Humiliation.’

Part of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ is the fact that China did have the long-term goal of recovering territories that it considered to have previously been parts of China. These past claims included India’s Arunachal Pradesh (what China calls ‘South Tibet’) the now-Russian parts of the Manchurian Northeast, today’s Republic of Mongolia (what China historically called ‘Outer Mongolia’), the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands (or ‘Diaoyu’ Islands in Chinese), and - perhaps the most comprehensible claim - Taiwan.⁹ Mongolia (recognized by the PRC in 1949) and the erstwhile Chinese parts of Russia’s Far East are no longer claimed by the PRC. Naturally, the ‘Chinese-ness’ of these diverse territories and islands is a matter of debate. Even Taiwan - seemingly the clearest case of cultural and historical closeness to China - has had a history of separation from the mainland and colonization by other powers, such as the Netherlands and Japan. To argue that Arunachal Pradesh (‘South Tibet’) rightfully belongs to China because it was once under Tibetan influence is even more far-fetched, to say nothing of the question of whether the northern part of Tibet should be an inherent part of China in the first place.

That China should suddenly show even indirect support for a big power (Russia) against a relatively weak one (Ukraine) in annexing a peninsula (Crimea) does suggest that China may be preparing future options, with Taiwan first in line for annexation, though this would be a re-integration from PRC’s viewpoint. China’s ‘problem’ regarding these lost territories is the fact that the ‘Century of Humiliation’ left China weak and resulted in its former territories in the hands of major powers (Russia, India, Japan), or at least with guarantees of protection from major powers (Russia, the U.S.).

How, then, can we explain China’s long-lasting preoccupation with non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs? China was - and still is - a country that is clearly more on the statist side (putting a premium on state sovereignty) than the solidarism side (putting a premium on transnational convergence such as human rights) of an international society spectrum. As such a, it is natural for China to emphasize and jealously protect its sovereignty, particularly in light of its own experience of relinquishing territory to infringing great powers (e.g., the port foreign concessions to European powers, including granting Hong Kong as a British colony).

Furthermore, China has historically been more used to being the dominant state in East Asia, exerting significant influence over neighbouring territories and controlling others by claiming suzerainty via its tributary system. Given its paradoxical development during the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, it was left with little choice but to defend its own borders in the weak position it held following the Japanese occupation of World War II and the ensuing civil war between the GMD and CCP followers. Hong Kong and Macao would be marks of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ for much of the Cold War, and Taiwan remains so today. With rising ambitions

⁹ See FlorCruz (2013) or Wade (2013). Other territories which are said to be in China’s plans to be recovered are not even recognized by the PRC as ‘disputes,’ such as Taiwan, but rather regarded as always having been under Chinese control.

(i.e., the rise to great power status via Peaceful Development), China is behaving more assertively as its economic resources grow.¹⁰

The annexed Crimean Peninsula has a two-thirds majority of Russians, allowing Russia to reference the right to self-determination of peoples to support its action. In contrast, there are not such high ratios of Han-Chinese ethnic minorities (or majorities) in other states adjacent to China's territory. The historical aspect (i.e., the fact that Crimea has changed hands a couple of times and that, even though it was part of Ukraine in recent decades, Russia has a historical claim to Crimea as well) may have been more important than the ethnic aspect in determining China's initial reaction to the case. Regarding its own former territories, China argues mostly in terms of history and former ownership in the Qing dynastic period, when China reached its biggest territorial extend. The CCP sees itself (more or less naturally) as the legal successor of this empire. The South China Sea is a good example of this, since the archipelagos affected are uninhabited, and therefore there cannot provide a claim based on the self-determination of peoples. Speculatively, China's behavior in the Crimean case, which is not in line with its previous stands on non-interference, can thus give the impression that China is getting ready to adjust its standpoint more to its growing power status and territorial ambitions in its neighborhood.

Naturally, the first step in regaining honor and legitimacy would be to lay the groundwork to regain the territory that was 'lost' to neighbors at the end of imperial times, which China sees as a humiliation to this day. For its domestic population, internal political legitimacy would be enhanced if China could regain these lost territories. The second step is related to China's relations with Russia. China suffered semi-colonial encroachment from Russia in its Northeast area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as Russia's later support for an independent Outer Mongolian buffer state. Relatedly, China was always considered the 'junior partner' in the alliance between Mao and Stalin from in the early 1950s until the Sino-Soviet split. With the energy deal that China and Russia closed in the course of the Crimean annexation and continuing secessionist conflict in eastern Ukraine, China has suddenly become the 'senior partner' next to Russia. This symbolic switch of positions is a partial alleviation of the 'Century of Humiliation' trauma, thanks to Russia's admission of China's status and prowess (albeit from Moscow's weakened position due to Western sanctions).

Convergence with, or Divergence from, the Peaceful Development Grand Strategy

Regarding the Peaceful Development factor of defending territorial integrity, even though the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the on-going secessionist efforts in Eastern Ukraine are not directly related to China's own territory, China had never previously allowed

¹⁰ Whether this change to more assertiveness was due to the leadership change from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, or the changed perception of the pace of catching up with the West and especially the U.S. in the course of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and Eurozone Crisis of 2010 (which mainly affected the West and to a much lesser extent China) is up for argumentation. It also put China in a position to be asked for credit from highly developed core countries and to be able to invest in American and European high-tech companies on the verge of insolvency

any power to interfere with any other state's internal affairs - including its own - and thus to violate the 'golden rule' of territorial integrity and sovereignty. In this context, not vehemently objecting to Russia's intervention in Ukraine may be considered counterproductive to China's own standpoint on sovereignty and territory. In international law, it is very important to act consistently. By not taking a clear stand against the violation of territorial integrity, China arguably makes itself vulnerable to such actions, as the Russian claim was based on the Russian ethnicity of the Crimean population. This would expose Chinese Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia to such historical claims.

In the context of PRC's peaceful development strategy, taking either side in the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine may not directly be considered an increase or decrease in China's national power. However, even though this issue does not have a *direct* effect on China's national power, one could argue, in light of the growing economic relations with Russian, that China's took advantage of the conflict to increase its influence. That is, China leveraged the situation, first, to come to terms with Russia on below-market-price access to natural resources in the neighboring state, and second, to diversify its energy resources acquisition through this deal. Brown (2015) writes:

At present, around 80 percent of China's energy is imported from the Middle East and West Africa. This represents a major strategic vulnerability since, in the event of conflict, the United States would use its naval superiority to control the Malacca Straits and cut off the supply of these vital resources. Closer ties with Moscow help reduce this problem since Russia, along with Central Asian states, can provide oil and gas supplies via more easily protected overland pipelines.

Moreover, the deal switched the roles of the two countries compared to post-World War II, when China was inferior to the Soviet Union, to a situation in which China is revealed as far superior, at least economically, to Russia.

Evaluating the Peaceful Development factor of 'anti-hegemonism,' or balance-of-power theory, would prescribe that one should side with the weaker side in a conflict. By siding with Russia versus the unified West (i.e., the European Union and the U.S.), China did follow this principle. However, if China's current actions in the South China and East China Seas are already interpreted as going against the U.S., then it has already met the conditions of conforming to anti-hegemonism. Also, since Ukraine is thousands of miles away from China's borders and can be said to be even on a different continent entirely, it would be hard to accuse China of having hegemonic ambitions in that sphere.¹¹

With regards to the necessity of maintaining favorable international markets, these actions were both conforming and divergent to the goal of maintaining Peaceful Development. China conformed insofar as it struck an energy deal with Russia in the background of the crisis, among

¹¹ In the event that China goes against the U.S. or U.S. allies in East Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia, conforming to anti-hegemonism may also be interpreted as China having covert ambitions to become a regional hegemon in Asia.

other stipulations of closer cooperation. This brought China better prices and a diversified supply route, as mentioned above. In addition, China gained greater access in Ukraine—arguably at the expense of Russia—concerning foreign direct investment (FDI) and acquisition of agricultural products (e.g., wheat). However, China diverged insofar as its actions may have aroused an impression of East-West confrontation, which may translate to poorer economic relations (as it has for Russia already). Certainly, China is seen to be expecting this reaction by hedging its energy supply through the deal with Russia, despite the fact that its own diplomats paradoxically called for less thinking by the West along the lines of Cold War mentality.

Determining the PD factor of international responsibility, at first glance, it is difficult to dispute that China was tolerating conflict by subtly backing Russia in this case. This may certainly be considered irresponsible in terms of charting a more peaceful Eurasia. A consistently neutral position would have served China best in this matter. Perhaps it was trying to make up for this misstep afterwards by sweeping into Ukraine thereafter, funneling in FDI and increasing imports of agricultural products.¹² Nevertheless, at second glance, as Brown (2015) writes,

“although undoubtedly carried out using aggressive means, Russia’s intervention in Ukraine was actually defensively motivated. The February 2014 revolution in Kiev brought to power a radically pro-Western government that explicitly sought to reorient Ukraine away from Russia’s sphere of influence. This was perceived by Moscow to be an unacceptable threat to national security, especially because it was believed it would eventually lead to Ukrainian NATO membership. Were this to have occurred, the Alliance would have gained the strategically important Crimean peninsula, as well as a 1,200-mile frontier with Russia’s European heartland. To eliminate this danger, Russia permanently seized Crimea and is using the separatist movements in Donetsk and Lugansk to prevent Ukraine’s successful integration with the West.”

Nonetheless, Chinese silence on such aggressive means cannot be said to be responsible behavior on the international stage. The actions of the Ukrainian people (protesting the pro-Russian government and then peacefully voting for a pro-Western government) were non-violent in nature, whereas the Russian actions of forcibly annexing Crimea and overtly supporting Eastern Ukrainian secessionist efforts both involved the use of military power. Thus, even in the context of geopolitics, China’s reaction in this case is problematic for its Peaceful Development grand strategy.

As far as threat perceptions are concerned, both aligning with Russia and selfishly taking economic advantage of the situation of the Russian ally contribute to China being perceived as a opportunistic in this situation. Naturally, aligning with authoritarian Russia rather than democratic Europe or the U.S. is in itself a factor in this perception of China as a threat. Since PRC’s response did not succeed in avoiding others’ perception of China as a threat, it has failed to sustain the Peaceful Development strategy.

¹² For further data, see, e.g., Liu (2016), American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation (2016), or Timofeev (2015), China (2015b; especially chapter 11 on Foreign Trade and Investments), China (2014b; esp. chapter 11).

China and the Narrative of National Honor

China's inconsistent behavior in the Ukraine crisis mostly pertained to internal legitimacy. The biggest surprise to the international community was that China, for the first time, did not stick to its 'golden rule' of non-interference in internal affairs, i.e., putting sovereignty and territorial integrity on a pedestal. Standing up to the 'West,' and the U.S. in particular, is supported by many hyper-nationalists within China, whether it is for the right reasons or not. Internally, securing cheap energy supplies from Russia can certainly be said to be rational behavior on the part of China, even if it is inconsistent with other aspects of its foreign and security policy.

With the subtle backing of Russia in Ukraine, China diverged from its earlier grand strategy. Only the very marginal gains that it could get from more trade with Ukraine in the aftermath and the favorable conditions with Russia could partially justify China's behavior. More energy resources add to Chinese power, and the diversification in supply make it less vulnerable to possible sanctions by the West in the event of more Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, especially if Japan-claimed maritime territory is annexed, which would entangle the U.S. in a conflict.

Besides economic interests, honor played a critical role here as well, as China now finally appeared as the senior partner in dealings with Russia. First, Russia and, later, the Soviet Union (as part of the Western great-powers conglomerate) had territorial ambitions in the Chinese Northeast, as still evidenced today by Russian buildings in Manchuria's capital of Harbin. Czarist Russia annexed some of these more remote territories when the last Chinese (Manchu-led) dynasty of the Qing was weak during the late nineteenth century, trying to gain access to southern ports from there.¹³

Second, when China became communist in the aftermath of the Civil War and struck a deal with the Soviet Union in 1950 for an alliance and friendship that was to last thirty years, China was clearly the junior partner with the 'big bear' as the senior partner. China naturally was still in shambles from ridding itself of the Japanese occupiers and the ensuing protracted civil war of Communists versus Republicans, whereas the Soviet Union had had time since the end of World War II in 1945 to consolidate internally and regroup. This alliance between Stalin and Mao would not last long, and China began to abandon its Soviet comrade in the early 1970s for the U.S., mostly since the Soviets were the greater threat of the two. Therefore, China switched sides, acting according to anti-hegemonism. So, to now appear as the senior partner coming 'to the rescue' of the Russian Federation, which was in turn weakened by Western sanctions, would carry much satisfaction for China in light of the historic Russian superiority. Therefore, rising in

¹³ Russia - connected to its long-standing obsession with gaining access to ice-free ports—Port Arthur (today's Lüshunkou district of Dalian city) was annexed during that time in history, and a railway from the Russian homeland all the way to Port Arthur was built to gain access to this ice-free sea haven. Incidentally, the recent annexation of Crimea is equally connected to the Russian search for ice-free sea ports much like this late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century case.

status against Russia serves as a ‘correction’ to what historically had gone wrong during the ‘Hundred Years of Humiliation’ era, as well as during the Cold War to some extent.

Third and finally, as mentioned above, the internal status and prestige gained from standing up to the ‘West,’ and the U.S. in particular, is also closely connected to national honor and the search for prestige, status, reputation, and recognition.

The China’s Participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

When it comes to external legitimacy and military strategy, there is not likely to be a better case than United Nations peacekeeping missions (UN PKMs) since they involve both factors. David Shambaugh calls the PKM “perhaps the most noteworthy example of China’s contributions to international security” (Shambaugh 2013, 271). China’s participation in UN PKMs is a fairly recent development. When the UN was founded after World War II, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was excluded and represented by the Republic of China (ROC; Taiwan) until the 1970s. Historically, right after the end of the Chinese Civil War, a Chinese stance developed that did not favor supporting international intervention:

China’s current support for international intervention stands in contrast to its opposition to the policy during the Maoist era. This stance was partially a product of the 1950–3 Korean War, which saw Chinese volunteer forces, heeding Mao’s call to ‘Resist America. Assist Korea’ (*kang Mei yuan Chao* 抗美援朝), by fighting alongside the communist North Koreans against South Korea, the United States and other UN forces. However, even after the Cold War China has insisted that international intervention must be guided by the UN and especially its Security Council. (Lanteigne 2016, 10)

Even as the PRC replaced the ROC in the UN Security Council (UNSC), it took about two decades to start reversing this strong principle for Chinese decision-makers. “Following Deng’s passing, China’s interest in organisations beyond economic ones increased. (...) [T]he governments of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were (...) far less fearful of being victimised by security organisations in relation to China’s views on UN peacekeeping” (Lanteigne 2016, 84). In all, “[s]ince the beginning of the 1990s, the PRC has also played a substantial role in UN peacekeeping missions, sending a total of 17,400 troops on nineteen separate peacekeeping missions between 1990 and the end of 2010” (Heilmann and Schmidt 2014, 25).

China’s Ongoing UN Peacekeeping Missions

As of December 2015, China is the ninth largest contributor to UN PKMs world-wide and the largest among the UNSC P5. At that time, it contributed 161 police personnel, 36 UN military experts, and 2,882 troops - more than 3,000 UN PKM personnel in total. This compares to the U.S.’s 82 total contributions, Russia’s 79, France’s 909, and the U.K.’s 289.¹⁴ Currently, China has troops deployed to UN PKMs in Liberia, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan,

¹⁴ See UN (2015).

and Lebanon, previously having deployed troops to Haiti, Libya, Iraq, Kuwait, and Cambodia. This engagement in UN PKMs should be valued highly by the international community because

Beijing views with deep suspicion one of the great projects of the post-Cold War international system: multilateral humanitarian intervention. (...) Beijing does not like this post-Cold War trend one bit. Sanctions and interventions against the will of sovereign states in the developing world run against China's post-1978 domestic and international ideology. (...) In this narrative, the real goal of international pressure was not the promotion of 'so-called human right' but the subjugation of China in a Western-dominated international order. With that (...), China has been very reluctant to sanction other sovereign states on such grounds, let alone allow UN-backed military intervention for the purpose of furthering humanitarian or security goals. (Christensen 2015, 162f.)

Only slowly, as its power and confidence grew, did the stance on UN PKMs change: "Finally, after harbouring much suspicion about multilateral security cooperation, Beijing has altered its views considerably since the turn of the century, favouring multilateral security cooperation in areas such as arms control agreements and United Nations peacekeeping missions" (Lanteigne 2016, 6).

This process took some time: from not being expressly pro-UN intervention at the beginning of the PRC's tenure with a seat in the UNSC it eventually actively participated in UN PKMs. As Marc Lanteigne writes: "China has praised the UN's views on security-building and more recently on disarmament, and during the 1990s took a more conciliatory view on United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention. China would later match words with deeds" (Lanteigne 2016, 78). This began with non-combat operations in "the 1989-1992 period, when it first dispatched military observers to Africa and the Middle East, and military engineering corps to Cambodia" (Shambaugh 2013, 299).

The determining change in China's view to support UN PKMs does not mean that it abandoned its belief in the somewhat statist conception of territorial integrity and sovereignty:

China tries to take a traditional political approach to these missions, generally sending troops when their deployment is blessed not only by the United Nations but also by the home government in the nation in question. By creating those preconditions and carefully using its power at the UN Security Council to enforce them, China is able to use its PKO role to check all of the important boxes in the PRC's self-generated national identity: a responsible great power (*fu zeren daguo*); a leader of the developing world; and a postcolonial state with a deep respect for sovereignty. (Christensen 2015, 163)

For a long time, it was true for Chinese deployments that "[i]n UN peacekeeping operations, the ground forces take part with engineers, logisticians, and medical personnel rather than with other combat units" (Heilmann and Schmidt 2014, 60). However, 2013 marked the first time China sent troops abroad with an actual fighting brief within a UN PKM; as Christensen explains:

Until it agreed to deploy 'blue helmets' to Mali in 2013, China had never agreed to send combat troops to PKO or stabilization missions. But China still lost fourteen peacekeeping and stabilization personnel in incidents such as Israeli air strikes in Lebanon and the earthquake in

Haiti. China even trains large numbers of other countries' peacekeepers in an impressive facility outside of Beijing.] (Christensen 2015, 163)

This step to cross the threshold of sending combat troops overseas marks a major change in China's attitude and actions within the UN framework, though China had already been involved in many Shanghai-Cooperation Organization 'peace mission' exercises in Central Asia.

More recently, in summer 2015, the Ministry of Defense published a white paper, *China's Military Strategy*, in which it also lays out a plan of action vis-à-vis UN military strategy under the subheading "Fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations" (China 2015a):

China's armed forces will continue to participate in UN peacekeeping missions, strictly observe the mandates of the UN Security Council, maintain its commitment to the peaceful settlement of conflicts, promote development and reconstruction, and safeguard regional peace and security. China's armed forces will continue to take an active part in international disaster rescue and humanitarian assistance, dispatch professional rescue teams to disaster-stricken areas for relief and disaster reduction, provide relief materials and medical aid, and strengthen international exchanges in the fields of rescue and disaster reduction. Through the aforementioned operations, the armed forces can also enhance their own capabilities and expertise. Faithfully fulfilling China's international obligations, the country's armed forces will continue to carry out escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and other sea areas as required, enhance exchanges and cooperation with naval task forces of other countries, and jointly secure international [sea lines of communications]. China's armed forces will engage in extensive regional and international security affairs, and promote the establishment of the mechanisms of emergency notification, military risk precaution, crisis management and conflict control. With the growth of national strength, China's armed forces will gradually intensify their participation in such operations as international peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance, and do their utmost to shoulder more international responsibilities and obligations, provide more public security goods, and contribute more to world peace and common development.

Naturally, there is not much controversial substance in this part of the white paper. It does announce, though, that China is to "intensify [its] participation in such operations as international peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance" (China 2015a). The main motive to participate in UN PKMs, as a responsible international great power, is reflected in the promise to "shoulder more international responsibilities and obligations, provide more public security goods, and contribute more to world peace and common development" (China 2015a). Especially the mentions of public security goods and world peace inevitably lead one to think of hegemony and Hegemonic Stability Theory, in which a benign (or mixed-motive) hegemon will provide public goods in an effort to keep the global market and international system open and stable as well as peaceful.

Though the white paper mentions humanitarian interventions, not all present actions of China are matched with these words, as exemplified not just by its participation in interventions but also its choice not to participate:

The Selective Multilateralists have advocated raising China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations, disaster relief, fighting international piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and diplomatic involvement in the North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues; but they eschew deeper involvement

in sensitive and risky areas such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Afghanistan. They essentially reject the entire transnational nontraditional security agenda. There remains a strong reluctance to engage in international security operations for 'humanitarian' reasons.' (Shambaugh 2013, 40)

Localization of the Peacekeeping Missions in Terms of Honor and Legitimacy

There is some room for interpretation over honor and legitimacy as factors in China's involvement in UN PKMs. Living up to the call upon China to be a more engaged international actor is where this role has been articulated. In that regard, China's status as a great power is enhanced. That this is directed toward external legitimacy becomes clear when one considers the longstanding history of China's stance on non-intervention, non-interference in internal affairs, and territorial integrity and sovereignty as 'golden rules' of international order. It took China a long time to accept the necessity of UN PKMs, as well as endorse them. It has now become the largest contributor in terms of personnel to PKMs among the UNSC P5.

Such involvement reflects a change in Chinese views on peacekeeping missions. For a long time China regarded these missions as incompatible with its demand for unconditional respect of its territorial integrity and state sovereignty. Today, however, the PRC is prepared to support intervention, provided such operations have the backing of a UN Security Council resolution and the affected country's advance permission. Here we can clearly see a pragmatic realignment of Beijing's interests with respect to support for intervention beyond its borders (fostering the image of China as a responsible superpower, stabilization of the surrounding region, and so forth). (Heilmann and Schmidt 2014, 25)

Any statistic on whose basis China can prove its responsibility and cast a shadow on the traditional great powers at the same time helps increase its status and reputation in a positive manner. For many living in developed countries, it is still a bit of a stretch to imagine a Chinese future superpower with a global presence that will act as a 'police force' the same way the U.S. has. The foreign media exposure in the framework of UN PKMs is certainly helpful in the power-transitioning process to reach people's hearts and minds to accept a benign Chinese leadership role.

While UN peacekeeping participation may have significantly increased China's external legitimacy vis-à-vis the other great powers, another dimension is the external legitimacy vis-à-vis the less developed countries (LDCs). China likes to present itself as the leader of the Third World, and as such it is helpful to slowly develop standing not just on the diplomatic and economic levels - which China has been doing maybe even to exhaustion - but also with respect to establishing a security and military foothold. That China is taking part in UN PKMs to impress LDCs more so than the P5 may be confirmed by a look at who else values contributing to UN PKMs: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Rwanda, Nepal, Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria complete the 'Top 10' of nations contributing most in total to the UN PKMs, with China coming in behind Ghana in ninth place.¹⁵

¹⁵ See UN (2015).

Despite contradicting a previously held position not to intervene in other countries and, thus, interfere with their internal affairs, seeing China with a global presence helps with internal legitimacy for domestic purposes. The home front understands that when China was in a relatively weak position post-World War II and post-Civil War in the 1950s, it had not much of a choice other than to condemn the ‘One Hundred Years of Humiliation’ and the behavior of Japan and others that tried to semi-colonize and subjugate China. The Chinese leadership had to maintain a strong, principled stand against interference in general. Now that China is powerful and to be reckoned with, the change in this stance is easily comprehensible. It cannot necessarily be interpreted as picking up on the historical legacy of the tributary system, especially if interpreted as a coercive tool which China used to subjugate neighbors, but it is possible to think of UN PKM participation as a tool to help overcome the ‘humiliation complex.’

Convergence with, or Divergence from, the Peaceful Development Grand Strategy

While at first look this case of UN PKM can easily be said to have no direct effect on the principle of territorial integrity - at least concerning the importance of China’s own border security - there is another viewpoint. As China has a longstanding tradition of putting an extremely high premium on sovereignty, representing a ‘pluralist stance’ in international society in English school terms, sending troops to other states where China does not claim land is partially contradictory to this stance.¹⁶ As China preached for a long time to others that no nation has the right to intrude in the internal affairs of another, the fact that it is willing to send personnel in a UN PKM can be seen as incoherent behavior. It has clear criteria, though, to make this step less problematic, i.e., that it is in the host nation’s wish that the Chinese (and UN) forces are present.

In the Peaceful Developing context of a nonetheless rising power, China often understands itself as a leading nation within the collective of LDCs - what used to be called the Third World, especially in Africa where most of the UN PKMs take place. That “China contributes more than the other four permanent members of the Security Council combined” (Christensen 2015, 163) says something about the importance that it attaches to being active for those states less fortunate and seeking development. China’s standing as a preeminent voice among LDCs occasionally gives it leverage over advanced great powers. This is the case especially when it comes to rectifying higher CO₂ emissions output for the sake of development to lift vast parts of its population out of poverty or when it comes to not abiding by certain free trade rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) when China makes use of protectionist actions such as the export restrictions on rare earth elements (REEs).¹⁷ This strong footing China has vis-à-vis UN PKMs

¹⁶ See, e.g., Linklater and Suganami (2006, 261), Scheipers (2010, 15ff.), or Navari and Green (2013). Pluralism is the wing of ‘international society of states theory’ which put a great emphasis on sovereignty, borders, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. The other side of international society - said to be the more progressive, western stance - is that of Solidarism, which emphasizes that territorial integrity can and should be softened in certain situations, for example when a genocide becomes imminent. Naturally, states which suffered a similar fate as China, who were victims of colonialism and exploitation by stronger nations, usually belong to the pluralist faction, so as to prevent future intrusion into their internal affairs and secure their survival as a nation.

¹⁷ See, e.g., AFP (2010), Bloomberg (2010), Chang (2010), Pruzin (2014), or Xinhua (2014).

gives it legitimacy (internally and externally) in many ways with the collective of LDCs. Thus, China's participation in UN PKMs is increasing its power - at least indirectly - and, therefore, conforming with its grand strategy.

Concerning the factor of anti-hegemonism, while it seems neutral at first look that China participates in UN PKMs, there are two viewpoints to this. First, if one sees the UN as a neutral international body, then participating in a UN PKM is perfectly conforming to the PD grand strategy. Second, if the UN is interpreted as a tool of statecraft which is mainly dominated by great powers and global hegemonies, and so is oppressive, then participating in a UN PKM contributes to U.S. hegemony, or at least perpetuates the sort of great power management and tutelage by the strong states in the international system. Thus, this would contradict the norm of anti-hegemonism and therefore diverge from China's grand strategy.

As far as the category of maintaining favorable economic markets goes, it does not seem relevant to this case at first glance. However, if one defines the maintenance of favorable economic markets as well as keeping peace politically and militarily, then participating in a UN PKM certainly applies as conforming to China's interests. As China has also heavily invested in those affected countries in which UN PKMs are taking place or may take place in the future, participation in them contributes not only to an altruistic 'greater good,' but in effect also to China's own self-directed, corporate interests.

The factor of international responsibility is without doubt the centerpiece of the Chinese government's motivation to participate in UN PKMs. China has been called to support international peace more actively by being the 'responsible stakeholder' it should be - starting with World Bank (WB) President Zoellick's speech in 2005.¹⁸ Taking on more responsibility through UN PKMs is certainly a step in the direction that Zoellick and others talked about. On the other hand, some domestic Chinese voices are convinced that "the West's call for China to play a greater role in global governance is (...) 'a trap to exhaust our limited resources!'" (Shambaugh 2013, 40; partially quoted from Pilling 2010). More on the balanced side, "Selective Multilateralists [in China] are wary of foreign entanglements, but they recognize that China must 'do some things' (as Deng Xiaoping suggested) in the international arena so as not to be perceived as [a] self-interested free rider in international affairs" (Shambaugh 2013, 40).

Avoiding others' perception of China as threatening is among the most important factors motivating its participation in UN PKMs. As Heilmann and Schmidt write, "China's initiatives in both the global and regional multilateral contexts aim to dispel fears regarding its ascent and to convey an image of a responsible superpower that believes in maintaining the status quo" (Heilmann and Schmidt 2014, 32).

Likewise, seeing China engaged in missions which are about peacekeeping and not combat actions or island-building certainly helps with attaching a more peaceful image to the Middle

¹⁸ See Zoellick (2005).

Kingdom - something that its PD grand strategy was engineered to do and which is, therefore, conforming to it. This is a signal mostly to smaller nations that may or may not have reason to fear China rising.

On a different dimension, because China participates in the existing United Nations and the existing global governance structures as they were mostly engineered by the U.S. after World War II, it goes to show that it is making an honest effort to maintain international peace and, therefore, possibly does not plan to challenge the existing system in the future if it surpasses the U.S. not just economically but also militarily. This sort of signal is meant not so much for the smaller states but for the great powers and hegemons that worry about long-lasting systemic peace.

In line with the factor of being a responsible stakeholder, this sort of altruistic international behavior helps increase China's reputation internationally, especially with the collective of LDCs but also with the great power elite which has been asking for a more active, less reluctant China. As explained above, UN PKM participation is likely to increase China's status and reputation with both DCs and LDCs; as Shambaugh (2013, 299) suggests:

China has received very high marks and positive evaluations for the quality and the integrity of its personnel and contributions to PKO operations (...). They are increasingly involved in mission leadership and decision making. In a limited fashion, China has also contributed to the delivery (mainly by sea) of equipment and personnel of other contributing nations' PKO forces. All in all, China's contributions to UNPKO have been a definite 'net plus' for the UN, China, and the recipient countries. It is a tangible - perhaps *the* most tangible - indication of China's contribution to global governance. China's overseas disaster relief is also a significant contribution. Since the 2004 Asian tsunami, China has also contributed personnel and resources to disaster relief in Asia and other parts of the world.

United Nations Peacekeeping Missions: Furthering Wider Interests

A look at China's continued participation in UN PKMs clearly shows that honor and support for external legitimacy are central drivers. First, taking part in PKMs enhances China's profile as a responsible great power engaging the international community. This speaks to the existing great powers which have called on China time and again to take on more responsibility. Such participation takes the steam out of that debate while helping China's status and reputation. Today, "China has arguably taken on the image and role of 'system maintainer' and 'responsible power' in the United Nations (...) and is one of the most vocal champions of the United Nations" (Shambaugh 2013, 139). Even outdoing the traditional great powers in the UNSC with troops deployed to PKMs is an intended development in line with Chinese arguments to counter accusations by the P5 of not acting like a responsible power (i.e., being able to list shortcomings versus Chinese engagement with PKMs).

Second, since China likes to present itself as the leader of the Third World, it was in some ways contradictory not to participate in PKMs in the past since doing so concerned LDCs for the most

part. Having a stake in these PKMs with deployed troops also caters to reinforcing China's external legitimacy.

Third, acting as a cooperative supporter of peace was a major tool against the 'China threat' theory, given its unprecedented rise in past decades. Seeing Chinese combat forces for the first time in a UN PKM in Mali helped put neighbors at ease with regard to speculation about China's future intentions. As a Chinese military advisor put it, "[p]eacekeeping is always the best [way of exercising] soft power to counter any 'threat theories' in the international [sphere]" (Chan 2014). Hard power used in a 'soft way' provides for a new kind of public diplomacy for PRC even as its military goes through continued modernization.

Fourth, subscribing to an interpretation of the tributary system in which China guaranteed the security of other states around it, or similarly the interpretation of it as a political alliance guarding against the Turkic nomad threat, participation in UN PKMs at least shows China in a 'protector' role. This may cater to the legacy of the external legitimacy of China's new economic engagement across Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific.

As far as internal legitimacy goes, the prestige of working closely with the UN is certainly not hurtful. For a long time, China argued that because of being an LDC itself, it could not focus its efforts on situations of other remote LDCs and rather needed to fix things at home. That the influence won in the PKMs could be (ab)used later for assertive purposes or the implicit justification of Chinese overseas presence (intertwined with economic interests) are aspects of internal legitimacy that may be popular domestically.

Conclusion

In effect, the analysis showed that China's often seemingly contradictory international behavior can be better understood when contextualized with its historical memory and sense of legitimacy. Whereas the ambiguous behavior on the part of China in relation to the Ukraine case is clearly connected to the 'Century of Humiliation' and directed toward internal legitimacy, the UN PKM case is linked to China's better days of being the regional hegemon in East Asia within its tributary system and directed for the most part toward external legitimacy. As such, the former case diverged from its Peaceful Development grand strategy on most counts and would be perceived by the international community as a manifestation of China's alleged assertive behavior; conversely, the latter case is largely in line with the PD grand strategy. It is not surprising in this context that under Xi Jinping a major debate has emerged as to whether China should no longer 'bide its time' but instead 'strive for achievement' on the global stage.

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