China’s Possible New Path

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The article traces the development of the “peaceful rise” concept in China right up to the eventual adoption of the “peaceful development” concept in recent times. The change is not a “demise” of the “peaceful rise” concept, but rather a rhetorical compromise to pacify the critics. Announced at the 17th Party Congress, the concept has become embedded in China’s official discourse since. However, peaceful development does not preclude modernisation of China’s military, an integral component of China’s rise to a great power status. A good analysis of intention is much more important than identifying China’s military capability.

WITH THE GROWING importance of China on the world stage, its peaceful rise/peaceful development theory, far from “demise” as some American analysts claim, has become an important area of academic research. How the current leadership shapes its foreign policy is of utmost significance for the future of China and the world.

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In December 2002, Zheng Bijian, Chairman of a newly founded research organization China Reform Forum (CRF), and former Executive Vice-President of the Central Party School, led a CRF delegation on a visit to the United States. During the trip, Zheng met and spoke extensively with leading American strategists, including former National Security Advisors Henry Kissinger, Zbignew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and Samuel Berger, as well as the serving Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Condoleezza Rice. The impression Zheng gained was that American strategists had both positive and negative views of China’s rise, with the negative outweighing the positive evaluation. Both the “China threat” and the “China collapse” theses were fairly widespread at that time. Upon his return, Zheng prepared and submitted a report to the top Chinese leadership, urging research into what he called a “new path of China’s peaceful rise” be quickly organised and conducted.

A month later, Hu Jintao, the new CCP General Secretary, offered his full support for the research project on China’s “peaceful rise” path. Soon the Central Party School was assigned to coordinate the research work and Zheng was asked to lead the efforts. The top leadership readily embraced the idea and encouraged the project. With this official endorsement, Zheng began to publicise the idea and sell it to wider audiences at forums such as the Bo’ao Forum for Asia. Thereafter the “peaceful rise” concept quickly emerged as a conspicuous topic that attracted much attention at home and abroad. President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao subsequently adopted the term “peaceful rise” and incorporated it into their most important speeches. It also quickly became a hot research topic in the social sciences in China.

The “peaceful rise” concept became not only popular, but also controversial. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) was reluctant to use the word “rise” (jue qi), being concerned that the use of the word might be inconsistent with the then guideline of keeping a low profile in the world. Quite a few retired ambassadors voiced their opposition to the use of “peaceful rise,” specifically targeting at the use of the word “rise.” These critics took full advantage of the latitude afforded by their positions to voice their opinions, often forcefully. Two main criticisms arose. The first consisted of objections to the concept itself. Advocates of this view argued that statements implying China had already risen were premature, owing to China’s uneven and unbalanced development. It was one thing for other countries to talk about China’s rise, but quite another for China to play up its own rise, they argued. Using a term like “peaceful development” would sound more modest and emphasise China’s desire to maintain a low profile in international politics. The second criticism was bureaucratic-procedural. To those in the MOFA system, foreign affairs were considered MOFA’s exclusive territory. A theory from outside this system was not looked upon kindly.

Aware of these different opinions, the leadership chose the prudent path of opting for the use of more modest wording: “taking a path of peaceful development.” Meanwhile, the “peaceful rise” project proceeded in parallel. After the 2005 Bo’ao Forum in April, Zheng again submitted his report to the top leadership, adding his speech at Bo’ao as a supplement. Soon after, Hu offered supportive remarks, “It is necessary to deepen the studies in ‘China’s peaceful rise’.” Despite the aforementioned differences, as late
as early June 2005 Zheng had had the opportunity of talking with Hu and other top leaders. Hu and Premier Wen once again provided their support for the project, a great booster to Zheng. Later that month Zheng again led a delegation on a visit to the United States. The agenda included a meeting with then Secretary of State Rice, the third time they had met since 2002. The successful visit helped pave the way for President Hu’s visit to Washington in September of that year.

The peaceful rise/peaceful development discourse and the debate over the emerging philosophy of Chinese domestic and foreign policies culminated in the October 2007 17th Party Congress Report, in which one section was devoted to the need to “unswervingly take the path of peaceful development.” Although the concept had been reiterated and elaborated previously, the inclusion of the formulation in a Party Congress Report was of particular importance. These reports are issued only once every five years and enjoy higher authority and respect than any other document in the country. The inclusion of the phrase “peaceful development” illustrates the consensus of China’s leadership on the term. Though disagreements remain, they are more rhetorical than substantive. Why did the ascendance of the “peaceful rise” concept prove to be a significant development in China? The crucial reason is it suggests a changing way of thinking regarding the path that China should take. Moreover, “peaceful rise” is not just a statement of intention, but a new philosophy in China’s domestic and foreign policy.

So, the change from “peaceful rise” to “peaceful development” occurred since the latter is more widely acceptable in China and least controversial. After all, China is increasingly becoming a pluralistic society in which very different views would emerge. The compromise was indicative of not the “demise” of “peaceful rise”, but a rhetorical change to moderate its tone and pacify those critics. Like what often happens, the change was an outcome of a compromise. What really mattered was the adoption of the concept as a new principle in China’s foreign policy doctrine through the expression of “taking a path of peaceful development.”

But does the peaceful rise/development discourse matter? Rhetoric can be shallow and is thus not that meaningful. However, it can also point to the direction for or create real constraints to policy-making. If something is emphasised repeatedly, it is possible that people become bound to it by expectations. Westerners tend to doubt rhetoric,
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When Ma Ying-jeou won the top Taiwan election in March 2008, everybody felt somewhat relieved and true enough, the cross-Strait relationship was brought back on track thereafter. With the resumption of talks and the realisation of the three links, cross-Strait tensions have lessened. However, Chinese analysts widely believe that the basic political configuration of “blue versus green” in Taiwan basically remains unchanged. The blue camp’s performance in recent local elections disappointed the mainland’s observers and policy-makers, and was a reminder not to overestimate the achievements thus far, which seem limited and are not irreversible. In that case, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has to remain well-prepared for a worst-case scenario and be ready to win a conflict should the Taiwan independence force move in a dangerous direction. Only when the PLA has the will and capability to do so can a war be eventually avoided. In order to make deterrence work, one has to convince others that his will and capability are real and that one is not a paper tiger and does have the teeth.

The second major demand comes from the rapid spread of China’s overseas interests, which have already become so ubiquitous and wide-ranged. That spread has been a three-phased development of “going-out.” First was the obvious “going-out” of Chinese
visitors and tourists. Not long after, the “going-out” of the Chinese enterprises followed suit for businesses in trade, construction and so forth. Of more fundamental significance is the “going-out” of the Chinese capital, a strategy of investment that will certainly continue despite experiencing some setbacks. In fact, the presence of China and its interests can be increasingly felt all over the world including remote areas like African, Latin American, or South Pacific countries. The recent pipeline construction connecting the Myanmar port and China’s southwest is but one example. That development has added to the burden of China’s security because stable provision and shipment of oil and gas have to be assured, and safety of sea lanes of communication has to be protected.

In that regard, China is unfortunate as it shares borders with as many as 14 countries on land, more than any other nation in the world. In addition, several other countries across the seas can be added to the already long list. The vast landmass, complex borders and the long coastlines require China to maintain a considerable armed force. In fact, a multi-purpose PLA does more than just that. Like the military in other countries, PLA has been engaged in operations such as natural disaster relief, international peace-keeping, anti-piracy naval cruises and other tasks. When the earthquakes devastated parts of Sichuan Province in 2008, the disaster relief operations would not have been successful without the PLA’s large-scale involvement.

Most nations are taking steps to modernise their military, and China is no exception. Understandably, however, that will somehow upset some foreign observers. For an accurate grasp of the nature of China’s military, three fundamental facts can be discerned and should be borne in mind. First, in terms of civil-military relations in China, there has been an institutionalised and solidified civilian control of the military. The “gun” is firmly put under the control of civilian leaders whose thinking matters more for the role of PLA, not the other way around. There is no reason why this situation will not continue into the future.

The second fact appears that peace as a value is very much established now and pursued, as embodied in the principle of “independent foreign policy in favor of peace.” After quite a few rounds of debates in the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese leadership and policy community have come very close to such a conclusion that the current era is an era of peace and development. This is a fundamental judgment of crucial importance for the formulation of China’s domestic and international policies. The judgment experienced challenges repeatedly over time, especially when major shocking events occurred. Prominent ones include the difficulties China encountered throughout the GATT/WTO membership negotiations, the 1999 embassy bombing in Belgrade, and the mid-air collision off Hainan Island in 2001, to name just a few. However, the judgment survived the turbulences and has been upheld until today. Through such experiences, China learned that lasting economic development can only be achieved in a stable and peaceful environment. It therefore has every reason not to disrupt but to strive for such an external environment.

Third, a good analysis of intention is surely much more important than identifying China’s military capability. The flawed argument that history repeats in full circle and major powers inevitably fight each other is a kind of fatalism that does not hold. Under
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More recently, China has been called upon to share responsibility in global affairs and to help provide for public goods, from which it should not and cannot escape. That appears to be the context the Chinese armed forces will become involved in more military operations beyond war, such as the one which has been underway recently in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia. Several years ago, when the earthquake-induced tsunami struck and devastated the Indian Ocean rim countries, China took actions for disaster relief and at the same time was painfully aware of the deficiency of its capability to rapidly project substantial military personnel and deliver supplies, as the US was able to do in just a few days. A more successful role of the PLA could be seen in 2008 during the disaster relief operations after the earthquake in Sichuan Province. Overall, it is conceivable that PLA will play a larger and legitimate part in global military-related affairs, a justifiable role which is by no means an expansionist and threatening one. A divergence of such a role would lead to an undesirable situation in opposition to China’s own interests, a situation its peaceful development doctrine inhibits. China’s overall defensive posture and a growing larger role in world affairs are the key to an accurate understanding of the path it is taking, both at present and in the future.