"Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission"

Hearing on
China's Current and Emerging Foreign Policy Priorities

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Alan M. Wachman
Associate Professor of International Politics
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
Tufts University

I. Overview

Labeling the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as "more assertive" is an unhelpful and risky distraction. There is no consensus about what elements of the PRC's posture in foreign relations should be seen as assertive or on what index one measures more or less assertiveness.

Labeling in an uncritical way tends to reflect—and reinforce—unexamined assumptions, perverting rigorous analysis. While "connecting the dots" to establish the existence of patterns is certainly vital to the assessment of threat, the image that emerges is only valuable if it is valid. The careless ascription of greater assertiveness to Beijing's foreign policy in the past few years exaggerates the apparent novelty of certain postures, miscasting as "new" attitudes and interests that have been enduring elements of the PRC's foreign policy since it was established in 1949. What has shifted, over time, are the means at Beijing's disposal to pursue objectives, and the influence its economic development has bought. Beijing has been characterized as employing these means in a "more assertive" manner since at least the end of the cold war, two decades ago.

In some respects, the PRC's foreign policy has been consistently assertive and unyielding. In other ways, it has been unexpectedly accommodating. Over all, though, the greatest challenge to the U.S. and its allies emanating from the PRC may not be a conflict with Beijing over "core interests," but core values.[1] This is not new. Beijing has long been engaged in a battle with the U.S. and its allies for moral supremacy and influence over global governance and the international order.

II. PRC foreign policy: more assertive?

There is a tendency to permit popular expressions and transient conceptual fashions to exert a distorting influence on the manner in which China is perceived and characterized. The record of this is extensive, but recent illustrations are the inclination to speak and write of China as "rising," or of China as "increasingly

[1] For a comprehensive overview of Beijing's concept of "core interests" see, Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part One: On "Core Interests," *China Leadership Monitor* 34, February 22, 2011, http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor.

nationalistic," and to describe the PRC's foreign policy as "more assertive." These terms may be intended as semantic shorthand that encapsulate complex developments in language that is easily apprehended and quickly conveyed, but because there is no consensus about what the concepts actually mean, they may mask more than they reveal. More troubling, careful consideration of the reasoning and impressions that contribute to a sense that the PRC is "rising" or "increasingly nationalistic" or "more assertive" may impel one to recognize that the simplistic conclusions these phrases encourage are inconsistent with evidence.

Relying on imprecise characterizations tends to reflect unexamined premises one may have about China. In other words, sloppy speech may reflect sloppy thinking. Characterizations of the PRC's foreign policy as "more assertive" may evolve rapidly to rhetorical habits that become a substitute for analysis, breeding a sense of import that the concept may not warrant. More worrisome is that certain terms become infectious because they comport with pre-existing perceptions of China. Employed uncritically, these catch-phrases may confirm sentiments that one has about China, regardless whether there is an adequate foundation in fact for the conclusions that the terms imply.

The Commission is to be applauded for asking, "Has China's foreign policy in recent years become more assertive?" The question is open, suggesting a wish to determine a proper view, not a determination to affirm a pre-established view.

What does "assertive" mean, in the context of an analysis of PRC foreign policy? Does it imply:

- ***Aggressive*:** Is it meant as a synonym for "aggressive"? Does it mean that the PRC is forceful or hostile or belligerent in its actions? Does it imply a greater reliance on military force?
- ***Insistent*:** Does "assertive" describe Beijing's tendency to be insistent about its interests? Is Beijing's policy described as assertive because of a perception that the PRC is prepared to state its views on foreign policy in an unabashed fashion?
- ***Widening scope*:** Is "assertive" meant as a measure of the scope of objectives that the PRC has undertaken as foreign policy aims? Is Beijing's assertiveness detected principally in its posture toward issues about which the PRC has been vocal or active in the past? Or, is Beijing seen as "assertive" because it articulates policy objectives that extend beyond a familiar roster of issues, affecting policy arenas where the PRC is perceived as a newcomer?

In sum, does "assertive" describe deeds, words, or scope of intentions? Or, is it "all of the above"?

What about the qualifier? What does it mean that the PRC's foreign policy is understood in some quarters as not, simply, assertive, but "increasingly" or "more" assertive? Does it imply:

- ***More than before***: Is this meant to compare the PRC's current level of assertiveness to an earlier level? If so, one is justified in wondering what is the baseline from which current levels of assertiveness are being measured?
- ***More than is ordinary***: Is "more assertive" meant to compare the PRC's level of assertiveness with the degree of assertiveness manifested by other states on comparable matters, suggesting unwarranted or disproportionate interest by the PRC?

Put simply, if the PRC's foreign policy is evaluated as "more assertive" one wishes to know: more than when, or, more than what?

One might also consider what elements of the PRC's foreign policy are encompassed by this concept. Is it all PRC foreign policy in all domains? Or, certain policies in certain domains that is gauged to be "more assertive." If "more assertive" refers wholly, or in part, to rhetoric, is it only the rhetoric of state and party officials and institutions that is taken into consideration, or does the impression of assertiveness arise as much or more from the hum and sputter of those whose opinions appear in press, even if they are not writing as authorized agents of the PRC government?

After all, the PRC has become a state that allows a degree of bounded pluralism, in which it is now permissible to express and publish views on certain topics—within admittedly unspecified political boundaries. One wonders whether some foreign observers of China confuse the jingoism and chauvinism in individual opinion with the foreign policy priorities of the state, a hang-over from the period when all public expression was understood as consistent with official policy.

These are not idle questions emanating from a peevish preoccupation with linguistic pedantry. Nor are these questions meant to dismiss consideration of PRC foreign policies and actions that have troubled foreign observers. Rather, they are posed as a prompt to more precise thinking. If one concludes that the PRC is "more assertive," it seems reasonable to ask what this means and on what basis one reaches the conclusion. In short, "how does one know?"

III. Remember what George Santayana wrote

Before determining whether the foreign policy of the PRC should be considered "more assertive" in the past few years, it is worth recalling something about the past.[2] Surely, those who now describe the PRC's foreign policy as "more assertive" are not comparing it to the policies of Beijing during the period from 1949-1976, when ideological zeal and Mao Zedong exercised disproportionate influences over the posture of the Chinese state. In that period, the PRC was often at war: on the Korean peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, on the Sino-Indian border, on the Sino-Soviet

[2] George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana, *Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense*. New York: Scribner's, 1905, 284, http://www.iupui.edu/~santedit/gsantayanaquotes.html.

border, and with itself—in a cascade of domestic political mobilization campaigns that indulged inclinations to violence. Presumably, when the PRC's foreign policy is now described as "more assertive," this is not a comparison to the period 1978-1979, when Deng Xiaoping sought a fundamental reorientation of PRC policy toward the world beyond its borders, normalized diplomatic relations with the U.S., and authorized an invasion of Vietnam.

Indeed, one wonders how many of those observers who consider the PRC's foreign policy over the past few years to be "more assertive" are aware that the PRC's foreign policy has been described in this way for decades? At least since the end of the cold war, PRC foreign and military policy has routinely been characterized as assertive.

In 1991, when the North Pacific Co-operative Security Dialogue met in Vancouver, the *Economist* reported

> . . . the real issue for the Pacific region is how to prevent the shifting balance of power from producing new conflicts. The hostility between the Koreas is one big problem . . . . A reduced American military presence, a collapsing Soviet Union, a strong Japan and a **more assertive** China present a whole host of others.[3]

In 1992, the *Daily Yomiuri* stated:

> Despite its enthusiasm for integration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Vietnam is likely to face many obstacles. Apart from reluctance within ASEAN, the group has to reckon with a **more assertive** China, the region's mammoth northern neighbor.[4]

Later in 1992, a staff writer at the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote:

> Chinese intellectuals, even those sympathetic to US concerns, see a bipolar rivalry deepening between an economically crippled but militarily powerful US and a changing, **increasingly assertive** China.[5]

In January, 1993, the *New York Times* published an article that states

> Buoyed by a strong economy, China is making far-reaching improvements in its armed forces, leaving many Asian countries feeling increasingly threatened by the behemoth in the neighborhood. . . . **China's assertiveness**

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[3] "Worthwhile Canadian initiative," *The Economist*, April 13, 1991, 35. LexisNexis.

[4] Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Vietnam Woos ASEAN As Ally Against China," *The Daily Yomiuri*, July 12, 1992, 6. LexisNexis.

[5] Sheila Tefft, "US Foreign Assertiveness Worries Chinese Citizens," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 16, 1992, 6. LexisNexis.

> in the South China Sea 'has aroused distrust and suspicion' among the five other nations with claims in the area."[6]

In 1995, the *Economist* reported that the PRC "helped fend off firm action by the UN Security Council" aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. "China has little interest in seeing a nuclear-armed North Korea, but even less, it seems, in letting the UN lean too hard on its prickly friend." Reflecting on the implications for security in Asia, the report states that Russia no longer has leverage and U.S. "military interest and influence are slowly receding." It concludes:

> Of the other powers that might play a greater role in Asia's security, India is too preoccupied and Japan is hobbled by weak government and constrained by many Asians' bitter memories of its wartime behaviour. As a result, an **increasingly assertive** China has been left with the most elbow room.[7]

In May, 1995, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

> Australia will throw its weight behind a regional campaign to bring an **increasingly assertive** China to the negotiating table over potentially explosive territorial claims in the South China Sea.[8]

In August, 1995, at a time when China was viewed principally as an economic challenge, an article in the *New York Times* states:

> There is growing alarm in Washington and other capitals at China's military spending and policies. . . . Most disturbing, China is pouring money into those activities that allow it to project power beyond its traditional borders. In particular, it is building a blue-water navy and developing an air-to-air refueling capability. China is also becoming **more aggressive** in the South China Sea and even in the Indian Ocean—far from its traditional sphere of influence.[9]

Is the foreign policy of the PRC in the past few years really "more assertive" than was Beijing's policy fifteen years ago, when it conducted missile exercises in the Taiwan Strait during March, 1996? Is the foreign policy of the PRC in the past few years "more assertive" than was Beijing's policy ten years ago, when a Chinese fighter aircraft flew so close to a U.S. EP-3 that the two collided, causing the death of the Chinese pilot, the disabling and emergency landing of the U.S. plane on Hainan, and an exceedingly tense period during which the PRC detained the U.S. crew? Is the PRC foreign policy in recent years "more assertive" than in 2005, when anti-

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[6] Nicholas D. Kristof, "China Builds Its Military Muscle, Making Some Neighbors Nervous; Filling a Perceived Power Gap in Southeast Asia," *New York Times*, January 8, 1993, A1.
[7] "China Looks Abroad" *The Economist*, April 29, 1995, 17. LexisNexis.
[8] David Lague, "Australia to press China on territory," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 1995, 1. LexisNexis.
[9] Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Real Chinese Threat," *New York Times*, August 27, 1995, SM50."

Japanese rhetoric was stoked to such a high degree that there was a spate of nasty and occasionally violent demonstrations in Chinese cities against Japan, which, for a time, seemed to bring the two states to an irredeemably low point in relations?[10]

The point is self-evident. Expression of concern about a "more assertive" PRC is not new. Of course, one could argue that even though the PRC was seen as "more assertive" two decades ago, it has continued along a trajectory, becoming ever-more assertive with each passing year. That does not seem to be what is implied by foreign observers of China and may, in any case, be a difficult claim to sustain for the entirety of PRC foreign policy.[11] While Beijing may be "more assertive" in some domains—posing threats to discretely defined U.S. interests associated with specific issues—in other arenas Beijing has cooperated and adapted to existing norms.[12]

IV. What is to be done?[13]

One hazard of declaring the PRC's foreign policy is "more assertive" and then wondering, as this Commission has, "how should the U.S. government respond to *any challenges* posed by China's assertiveness [emphasis added]" is the possibility that doing so conveys an impression that the U.S. and the PRC are locked into an adversarial, zero-sum competition in all interactions. If the PRC becomes "more assertive," so an irrational line of reasoning might have it, then it is incumbent on the U.S. to do something in response.

The U.S. government is not—nor, one prays, will it ever become—so feeble and foolhardy that it can be distracted from advancing interests established in particular matters by an ill-defined sense that the PRC is generally "more assertive." Washington's response to a challenge by the PRC to a U.S. policy objective, if one is warranted, has to be calibrated to the specific nature of the PRC's posture as it affects specific U.S. interests, not to a vague impression that Beijing has become more arrogant, triumphal, over-confident, or even belligerent. One should consider prudent responses to adjustments in PRC policy that affect U.S. policy objectives on a case-by-case basis, but not in a categorical fashion, as the question suggests.

Just as it would be imprudent to ignore threats posed by the PRC to specific U.S. interests, it is equally ill-advised to reify a "Chicken Little" view of the PRC as an existential menace to the U.S.[14] Identifying a challenge to U.S. interests in the

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[10] Philp P. Pan, "Japan-China Talks Fail to East Tensions; Protests Continue as Foreign Ministers Confer in Beijing," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2005, A09.

[11] Michael D. Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," *China Leadership Monitor* 32, May 11, 2010, 2-4, http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/3601.

[12] Alastair Iain Johnston. *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 197ff.

[13] Any correspondence between this subheading and a pamphlet authored in 1901 by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who appropriated the title for his work from a novel written in 1863 by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, is intended entirely as irony.

[14] The moral of this fable varies depending on how the tale is rendered. The point, here, is to refrain from assuming that "the sky is falling" if one is struck on the head by an acorn that has dropped from a branch.

intensification by Beijing of its rhetorical posture or effort to advance any foreign policy objective may reflect the undisciplined anxieties and insecurities of the observer as much as—or more than—conclusive evidence of threat. Misperceptions of threat have the tendency to provoke hostile reactions—both attitudinal and behavioral—that contribute to the deterioration of relations and, in the extreme, to an erosion of security that the risk-perceiver had hoped to avoid.

A preoccupation with the "wrong" threat is risky because it may cause one to ignore genuine sources of danger. Even more insidious is the capacity of a determined adversary to take note of rigid patterns of defense, and to exploit these to the defender's disadvantage. Put simply, if one is perpetually and inflexibly poised to parry an anticipated blow from the right, one may be prepared to defend oneself if such a blow emerges. One may even deter one's adversary from attempting to hit. However, one may miss—or invite one's adversary to land—a blow from the left. A durable defense is founded on a refined capacity for flexibility, alertness to shifts in conditions—no matter how slight—and nimble reactions, not from a doctrinaire view of what is right and wrong, or who is nasty and nice.

There is ample evidence in word and deed that the PRC has explicitly linked its continued development to the established international system. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that the PRC is an "existential adversary" of the U.S. of the sort that it may once have seemed, or that the Soviet Union was perceived to be during the cold war.[15] Washington must still contemplate how a military clash in one matter of dispute with Beijing—a Taiwan "contingency" is the prospect most frequently considered—might escalate to unintended levels of comprehensive conflict. That, though, is a matter of deterrence, crisis avoidance, and crisis management. PRC plans to secure its desired outcome vis-à-vis Taiwan by force, if push comes to shove, should not be interpreted as a concerted aim of the PRC to supplant or obliterate the United States of America, any more than U.S. intentions to defend Taiwan should be understood as an American interest in destroying the PRC.

V. Be careful what you wish for

Is it in the interest of the U.S. to have an assertive China, or not? In 2005, Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick was widely quoted when he said that the U.S. should "encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. As a responsible stakeholder, China would be more than just a member—it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success."[16] If the U.S. expects the PRC to become more engaged in sustaining the economic, political, and security regimes that undergird the international system, Beijing will need to assert itself. It will have to override a habit of viewing itself a

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[15] Edward S. Steinfeld. *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West.*" Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 232–33.

[16] Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York City, September 21, 2005, http://www.state.gov/s/d/rem/53682.htm.

passive free-rider on the international system, and enhance its role as a provider of global goods.

Enhancing its role would correspond to the final portion of the oft-cited 28-character maxim attributed to Deng Xiaoping that is known for the passage "conceal your capabilities, bide your time." In the final line, Deng entreats Chinese to "make some effort" (*yousuo zuowei*)—a point that President Hu Jintao emphasized in July, 2009, when, addressing a conference of Chinese ambassadors, he reportedly urged that China should "make efforts so that China will have more influential power in politics." (*nuli shi woguo zai zhengzhishang geng you yingxiangli*).[17]

Making a greater contribution to global governance and assuming more responsibility will very likely entail friction within existing international regimes, as the PRC articulates its own preferred means for managing the processes by which international norms are established and regulates the provision of international "goods." Zoellick acknowledged "Cooperation as stakeholders will not mean the absence of differences—we will have disputes that we need to manage."[18]

Zoellick may have understated the difficulties. A Chatham House report states

> co-opting China into international organizations has not proved effective in inducting it into global norms. In fact it has offered a platform for China to project its own norms and standards and to band together with developing countries for a stronger front. While China's growing wealth has not made it a more responsible global stakeholder, it has given it the confidence to stand its ground and go its own way.[19]

A glib reaction would be to say that if the PRC is to be "responsible," it must accept the international order as it finds it, putting its national shoulder to the wheel of advancing common interests as they have been defined, not challenging procedures or outcomes to suit Beijing's own parochial interests. Those who hold that view would benefit from greater accommodation to the realities of international politics. Moreover, the Chatham House report makes the point that the PRC "is arguably more non-participative than disruptive in multilateral frameworks."[20]

The PRC has been seen as disruptive in certain bilateral interactions, including the harassment by Chinese vessels of the USNS *Impeccable*, the defiant response of PRC

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[17] Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," 5, see, also, n. 28; Qian Tong: "The 11th Meeting of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys Convenes in Beijing; Hu Jintao Makes an Important Speech; Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Li Changchun, Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, He Guoqiang, and Zhou Yongkang Attend; Wen Jiabao Makes a Speech" reproduced as "Xinhua: Hu Jintao Addresses Chinese Diplomats' Meeting in Beijing 17-20 Jul," World News Connection.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Kerry Brown and Loh Su Hsing, "Trying to Read the New 'Assertive' China Right," Chatham House, Asia Programme Paper: ASP PP 2011/02, January 2011, 13.
[20] Brown and Loh, "Trying to Read the New 'Assertive' China Right," 10.

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to a statement by U.S. Secretary of State Clinton concerning the South China Seas dispute made at a meeting of ASEAN in Hanoi, the contretemps following the detention by Tokyo of a Chinese fishing boat captain whose vessel rammed a Japanese coast guard ship and the suspension of rare earths shipments to Japan in apparent retaliation, stern statements urging the U.S. not to sail into the Yellow Sea a U.S. aircraft carrier engaged in joint military exercises with the Republic of Korea, and a statement attributed to Dai Bingguo designating the entire South China Seas as among the PRC's "core interests."[21] These events are framed as evidence that the PRC has abandoned its declared policy of "peaceful development" and has, in the wake of the financial crisis that has shaken the U.S., intensified its efforts to push back at the U.S. and its allies in ways that contribute to a sense that Beijing has adopted a "more aggressive" foreign policy.

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Thomas J. Christensen, sees matters differently. These irritants, which he characterizes as "retrograde behavior," are not emblems of new assertiveness, but the persistence of truculent conservatism. However, during the period 2006-2008 when the PRC assumed greater responsibility in applying pressure to North Korea, when it exercised leverage in Sudan and took a leading role in the UN peacekeeping mission there, and when it dispatched ships to the Gulf of Aden to collaborate in an international effort to combat piracy in the waters off Somalia, Beijing asserted itself in furtherance of interests that it and Washington recognized as common interests. Christensen distinguishes abrasive diplomacy from an assertion of responsibility for global governance. He concludes that facing complex transnational problems—such as proliferation, piracy, terrorism, environmental degradation, international financial regulation, to name only a few—the United States actually "needs a more assertive China."[22] Of course, it matters whether the PRC's assertiveness is constructive and collaborative, or destabilizing and destructive.

VI. PRC foreign policy priorities: emerging and enduring

As the Commission considers Beijing's emerging foreign policy priorities, one hopes it will bear in mind the PRC's enduring priorities, as well. These have been clear for years and arise from Beijing's dissatisfaction with moral values that appear to dominate determinations of how rights, responsibilities, and privileges are apportioned to states. The PRC advances a communitarian vision of the optimal international society and preens as a moral exemplar, championing the cause of the "global South." This posture pits the moral vision of the PRC against that of economically developed, legacy powers—the United States chief among them—that appear to favor liberal, cosmopolitan underpinnings of international regimes and institutions and the order to which those contribute. Hongying Wang and James Rosenau list four elements of the PRC's approach to an ideal world order:

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[21] Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On "Core Interests," 8–9.

[22] Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

- **democratization** of global governance to ensure that decisions are representative of all states, not a handful of powerful, Western states;
- **justice and common prosperity**, to close the gap between rich and poor nations as a way to diminish conflict and enhance stability and peace;
- **diversity and pluralism**, rather than cultural imperialism, so that states are not penalized for evolving political systems or paths to development that reflect idiosyncratic history, culture, and other conditions;
- **peaceful resolution** of international conflicts.[23]

This, too, is hardly new. At least since the Bandung Conference of 1955, the PRC has asserted its wish for adjustments of the international norms it views as reflecting the parochial interests of developed states. The "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" that Zhou Enlai articulated then appear to be the genetic code of the PRC's foreign policy, threaded through major pronouncements on foreign policy, including Zheng Bijian's commentary on China's "Peaceful Rise" and the PRC's "Independent Foreign Policy of Peace"—the standing guide to Beijing's foreign policy priorities.[24] The keys, from Beijing's perspective, are the sanctity of state sovereignty (e.g. "don't you dare tell us what we must do within our own territory!"), mutuality in bilateral interaction (e.g. "don't impose on us what is good only for you, treat us as equals"), and respect (e.g. "demonstrate to us that we are as glorious as we have been trying to persuade ourselves we really are"). For all the measurable expansion of economic and military might—the PRC is still a state with an enormous chip on its shoulder. Its officials still operate from under the dark clouds of wounded pride and abiding insecurity. This may drive the behavior that others see as assertive.

VII. Conclusion

There are good reasons to worry about the actions and intentions of the PRC. Aggression is alarming. Expressing concerns about labels used to describe the PRC is not meant to dismiss the need for the U.S. to remain alert to threats emanating from the PRC. As it contends with the PRC, the U.S. could fall into the conceptual trap of viewing whatever Beijing seeks as "bad" for the U.S., and whatever it opposes as "good." However, if Washington genuinely seeks greater involvement by Beijing in managing mutual problems, it will have to expect greater assertion by Beijing of its own preferences. Then, when fundamental values conflict, the U.S. will have to decide whether to rely more on the persuasion of force, or the force of persuasion.

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[23] Hongying Wang and James Rosenau, "China and Global Governance," *Asian Perspective* 33:3 (2009), 18-21.

[24] See the PRC's articulation of foreign policies, including "China's Independent Foreign Policy of Peace," http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wjzc/. Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 18 (2005).