

The “Peace” in China’s Peaceful Rise

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SRIPARNA PATHAK, OCT 15 2015

The international system has undergone a number of changes, the latest of which include the ‘emergence’ or ‘re-emergence’ (as in the case of China and India) of ‘new’ countries as powerful players in the system. This is primarily due to the economic growth of Asian countries, which has led to a greater degree of multipolarity in the international system; power is now calculated not only in military terms but in economic terms as well. With the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the U.S. emerged as the most powerful state in the global arena. However, rapid economic growth of countries like China also meant that players emerged in the global arena that, as a virtue of their growing economic clout, now have a voice in determining international affairs. The rise of China as a significant player in international politics is often viewed with suspicion, and questions emerge whether it will challenge the traditional hegemony that the U.S. has had. In order to answer whether the rise of China in international relations is a peaceful one or whether it is a Thucydides trap, it is essential to understand what China means by a “peaceful” rise (later replaced with peaceful development) followed by a closer look at the theory and history of great power politics.

The concept of “peaceful rise” (*Zhongguo heping jueqi*) was an official policy which emerged under the leadership of Hu Jintao. The term was an attempt to rebut against the “China threat theory”. The “peaceful rise” concept sought to characterise China as a responsible world player, emphasising soft power and that China is committed to its own internal issues and improving the welfare needs of its citizens before interfering in world affairs. However, the usage of the term “rise” was seen as controversial since the word could lead to perceptions that China’s “rise” is a threat to the established international order. Therefore, since 2004, the term has been replaced with “peaceful development” (*Zhongguo heping fazhan*). The need to come up with such a concept arose because, as has been seen in the past, the emergence of a new pole of power has often resulted in drastic changes in the global political structures and even war – which is well-explained through the theory of hegemonic stability and that of offensive realism in particular in International Relations.

The term “peaceful rise” was coined by Zheng Bijian in late 2003. According to Zheng, the rise of new powers in the past led to an imbalance in the global political structures and war because these powers chose the road of aggression and expansion. Zheng Bijian’s inspiration for the concept arose during an official visit to the U.S. in December 2002 where he reportedly experienced the pervasive discourse of the “China threat” and “China collapse” first hand. As prescribed by Zheng, the People’s Republic of China will develop peacefully and, in turn, help to maintain a peaceful environment. The speech given by Zheng was at the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan province. The real attempt behind the introduction of the concept was to provide the international audience an introductory glimpse of the new strategic thinking that was emerging in China based on newer conceptualizations of power.

In addition to the promotion of the concept of peaceful development, the leadership of the country has also embarked on a program of “neighbourhood diplomacy,” emphasising good neighbourliness and friendship and partnership; China has furthermore asserted that, unlike Western powers, it can rise peacefully due to its unique Confucian cultural tradition. However, history suggests that when a rapidly rising power threatens an established power, competition inevitably leads to conflict – the Thucydides trap in other words. According to a reading of European imperial history by scholars such as Kenneth Waltz and Ralser & Thomson, states seek to maximise their security and therefore their power, which inevitably leads to inter-state military competition. More recently, John Mearsheimer has undertaken an analysis of the Asia-Pacific region, which is now a region of emerging powers. In his book titled the

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Tragedy of Great Power Politics (published in 2001) he stated that the rise of China in the 21st century will be fraught with challenges. Against this, as stated previously, stands the Chinese leadership’s concept of peaceful development, which essentially states that Chinese development will not threaten the established order. Dr. Yuan-kan Wang, in his book *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*, seeks to address the question of whether the Confucian exceptionalism will exempt China from the traditional patterns of conflict or not. The study undertaken by Dr. Wang challenges the popular narrative of China’s historic cultural pacifism, and states that the Confucian tradition is used as a legitimising mechanism for its development and growing military power. Dr. Wang’s conclusion posits that China will gradually shift to an offensive grand strategy once it has accumulated sufficient power.

As posited by offensive realism, China’s attempts to dominate the region will increase with its increasing clout, just the way the U.S. dominates the Western Hemisphere. The reason behind this is that the best way to survive in international anarchy is to be the sole regional hegemon. China has ongoing and often violent territorial conflicts with the Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Malaysia and Brunei. With growing economic clout, China’s policies towards territorial disputes have become more aggressive. This is exactly in line with what has happened in the Western Hemisphere and the U.S., and what is posited by the theory of offensive realism. With increasing economic might, domination is the best way to survive under international anarchy. The more powerful China is, the better it will be able to settle its disputes according to terms that it favours.

An example of Beijing’s hegemonic aspirations is the Asia Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), which is an alternative that China is providing to the multilateral institutions of the Bretton Woods system. This is a potential vanguard for an alternative economic order. It also is a reflection of Chinese ambitions to emerge as a powerful alternative in the international economic order – clearly what is prescribed by the theory of offensive realism. AIIB’s creation and existence simply mean that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which have been the dominant players in development lending and financial regulation, now have an Asian counterpart. The Bretton Woods institutions in the form of the IMF and the World Bank so far have been promoting the political world views of their most powerful members. Now, the AIIB will play a similar role – promoting political and economic interests of its powerful members, and China’s interest will certainly feature prominent on the agenda.

Another example of the fact that the “rise” will not be as peaceful as has been put forth by the concepts of peaceful rise/peaceful development, and will be more on the lines of a Thucydides trap, are incursions undertaken by the People’s Liberation Army in September 2014 when Xi Jinping was on an official visit to India and in discussions with the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, on issues that would impact peace and development of the entire region. Concepts of “neighbourhood diplomacy” and “peaceful development” dissipated in the face of Chinese aggression. This is remindful of the American attempts at regional hegemony in history. After independence in 1783, the U.S. over the next seven decades created a powerful country. Wiping out Native Americans in large numbers, plundering land and property, purchasing Florida from Spain in 1819, annexing Texas in 1845 and waging war with Mexico in 1846 – these were all a part of its goal of establishing American hegemony in the region. President James Monroe articulated the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. According to the Doctrine, U.S. intervention was deemed necessary to prevent European nations’ colonisation efforts. By the end of the nineteenth century, the European great powers had become minor players in the Americas. The U.S. achieved regional hegemony and this, in turn, led it to become a secure great power.

If this example from history was to be taken and the Chinese case was to be juxtaposed, then not too many differences would be found. The increased aggression that China has been displaying in Asia, its active suppression of Tibetan/Uyghur dissent, and the setting up of alternative economic structures among others are all evidences of the fact that the Thucydides trap exists and that there is nothing “peaceful” about China’s rise or development. It is simply offensive realism – and even though China attempts to camouflage this with sugar-coats of Confucian traditions, concepts of “peaceful development” and “peaceful rise”, this can be regarded as nothing less than attempts at achieving hegemony.

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