China: When the Dragon Wakes

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Napoleon said that the world should beware the sleeping dragon, lest it awake. In his day, China was not only asleep but lost in a time before modernity and unable to emerge from the dense dream of a bygone world – where it had been the most advanced country on earth, surely the most virtuous and wise, yet somehow it was now submerged by the power and the depredations of what were once barbarian states with primitive rulers and uncouth populations. The dragging of a somnambulant China into globalisation was a huge shock to what had become an isolated and conceited empire.

The imperial powers of the 19th century, joined by a rapidly modernising Japan, subjected China to huge humiliations that continued into the 20th century – especially on the part of Japan, who occupied much of China in the years leading up to World War II. The Chinese did not help themselves, divided into two competing armed camps with aspirations towards two very different forms of republic, a Japanese puppet administration, and several warlord enclaves. Chinese armies, no matter how desperately if belatedly they sought to modernise, fell before the Japanese because of terrible Generalship. The Nationalist Kuomintang faction, led by Chiang Kai Shek, was an official ally to the US, the UK, and the Soviet Union during the war – and fought with the British for Burma – but faced both the Japanese and the communist army of Chairman Mao back home. At the end of World War II, struggle continued in China, and the communists were victorious in 1949, driving Chiang's Nationalist forces into exile on the island of Taiwan. But China was in ruins, and the communist regime instigated its new social and economic policies at great cost to stability in the country. Diplomacy was, except with the communist Soviet Union, not a priority and, in any case, the US as ally of the defeated Nationalists was determined to freeze China out of international diplomacy and respectability.

The US, using its veto power in the Security Council of the new United Nations, prevented China from taking up its own seat on the Security Council, maintaining the rump Nationalist regime in its UN place. By 1956, even relations with the communist Soviet Union began to cool, as Nikita Khrushchev began the process of repudiating the tyrannical excesses of Stalin. To the Chinese, this was the beginning of a revisionism too far, and justified the new diplomacy to find allies in the wider world. Khrushchev became first secretary of the Soviet communist party on the death of Stalin in 1953, and there were no public indications that he would deviate significantly from the legacy he had inherited. The 25 February 1956 speech, in which – for four hours – he accused Stalin of having led a personality cult, startled the entire communist world; very much including China. But it had become clear to the Chinese even before then that relying solely on the Soviet Union for diplomatic support was unwise. In April 1955, therefore, Zhou Enlai went to the Bandung Afro-Asian conference – a huge gathering of leaders from the emerging world, and the key forerunner to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and gave a landmark speech.

The diplomatic foray by Zhou, the Chinese premier, was a search for diplomatic allies and to garner international appreciation for what China had been through. Simultaneously, it was a real attempt by China to recognise that

others had also gone through a century or more of horrible imperialisation. The Chinese had been so isolated from the outside world that they really had no empirical grounds for solidarity; they could not be ideological grounds, as most of the Afro-Asian world was not communist, although many countries had leanings towards one form or another of socialism; so Zhou pitched his address essentially on ethical grounds – with the insinuation of empathy. Others despoiled you. We will help you. Others imposed their sovereignty upon yours and interfered in the workings of what should have been your governments. We will never intervene in your internal affairs. The combination of assistance and non-intervention has been something the Chinese have tried to live up to, even if problematically, ever since.

In the wake of Bandung, China began its financial assistance to emerging nations – despite the Chinese communist state being only seven years old and governing a desperately poor and underdeveloped country. Chairman Mao's quick-fire jump-start schemes to hasten modernisation and industrialisation not only failed, but had huge costs in terms of social dislocation. He was a visionary poet trying to be an industrial planner, with very little knowledge of either industry or industrialisation. Those around him, like Zhou, and later Deng Xiaoping, picked up the pieces and tried to bring a pragmatic and scientific order to Chinese development. If Zhou led the way in international relations with his Bandung speech, he was also hugely influential in pioneering the concepts of the 'four modernisations', and did so as early as 1963. They were later made official policy by Mao's successor as Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, in 1978. These 'modernisations' were critical to China's developing the industrial, and hence economic base that was necessary for its international relations of assistance to others – not to mention competition with the Western developed world.

Zhou also pioneered what later became the Chinese Three World Theory, described below. Although this theory was articulated as the official Chinese world view, again by Deng Xiaoping, in a speech to the United Nations in 1974, Zhou had laid down its ingredients in the 1960s. It was suitably poetic for Mao to be enthusiastic about it, and it was declared to be a formulation by Mao, in concert with the Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, then regarded as an African 'philosopher-king', during Kaunda's visit to Beijing in 1974. It continued the themes enunciated by Zhou at Bandung. But, before 1974, the breakthrough diplomatic event that gave China the international freedom to develop its Bandung vision – the *rapprochement* with the US – took place.

Table Tennis and the Use of Third Parties

The *rapprochement* was a goal of Henry Kissinger, who wanted three things: firstly, the freedom to confront the Soviet Union as a sole superpower antagonist, without the distraction of China as another antagonist; secondly, a sense of responsible limits to Chinese regional behaviour should the US successfully exit from the Vietnam war; and, thirdly, the incorporation of China into the world's concert of great powers, both to make the concert credible and viable – with no one playing discordant notes off-stage – and to make Chinese behaviour respect the limits of being part of a concert, and therefore predictable.

For the Chinese, it was desirable. It meant China did not have to confront both the Soviet Union and the US; it meant a step towards a more peaceful region if indeed the US did resolve its interests in Vietnam; it meant being recognised, finally, as a great power – even if it meant being in a concert – and ending, officially, the epoch of humiliation; and it meant steps could be taken to achieve economic prosperity in a trading regime that did not exclude the West and, in particular, the US.

However, Kissinger had no diplomatic links directly with China at all. Moreover, US knowledge of China was limited, given the purging of linguists and Sinologists from the State Department during the McCarthy era of anti-communist witch-hunts. The Chinese were hardly in a much better position. To an extent, without organisational processes and without repertoire planning, the key roles played by Kissinger and Zhou represented the purest form of 'rational actor' behaviour seen in post-war international diplomacy – even though, in the proper sense of the word 'rational', it must be said that the two men trusted alarmingly to intuition. Their success in being able to develop formidable personal chemistry was an accident of history. Kissinger had to use dictators for his entry point, and the Chinese had to deploy table tennis as a symbol that a new history was possible. Looking back, it was in some ways silly.

Kissinger made secret overtures in 1970 to Pakistan's Yahya Khan and Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu, the former

responsible for the rebellion in East Pakistan that year and eventually its bloody secession as Bangladesh, and the latter a communist dictator certainly not mourned by the US when he was summarily executed in 1989 – and asked them to use their good offices to sound out Beijing's willingness to talk. Beijing intimated that it was willing, and then used its own subterfuge to invite US athletes to play a table tennis match in China. This happened in April 1971. In the diplomatic isolation of China after World War II, and in the ensuing era of political hostility, no such contact had ever seemed possible. It was the advent of 'Ping Pong Diplomacy', and the general sense internationally was that relations between the US and China could be unfrozen. Even so, Kissinger made two secret visits to Beijing, in July and October 1971, working with Zhou Enlai in preparation for a public visit by President Nixon to China the following year. That visit was full of pomp, but was really only the face of a *rapprochement*, the detailing of which had little to do with either Nixon or Mao. But, even though on the Chinese side it had almost everything to do with Zhou, there was as yet no full trust of the US. After so many years of hostility, there would not be an overnight transformation in foreign policy outlook. Thus, the Chinese continued work towards the Three World Theory.

The Theory and its Limits

The actual theory did not last long as an active conceptualisation of the world. It was as much a sentimentalism as anything else – a sense that China had a leadership role, especially amongst those who were also emerging from humiliation. The theory proposed a First World of imperial outreach and ambition, and this was a conjoint US and Soviet Union; i.e. the two great superpowers still sought global domination. The Second World was constituted by an intermediate zone, consisting in countries from Europe and, although the theory did not say so, as the Chinese never really had an articulated approach to this part of the world, from Latin America. This world could be courted by either the First or Third Worlds and success in this courtship could determine the power struggle between the First and Third. In this sense, the theory had diplomatic goals. The Third World was basically the emerging world, the Non-aligned world, but with a twist – it was a world led by China; championed by China; protected by China.

It was this conceit, that China *could* do these things, and that other Third World states would *want* China to do these things, and that China would never do things itself against the interests of these states that, in a very short time proved false. In 1979, the Soviet Union – from 'out of a blue sky', as Western military strategists put it, i.e. without warning signs or even visible signs of preparation – invaded Afghanistan. The West could not prevent it; and nor could China. A part of the Third World had been overtaken by one half of the First – and China, far from being its effective champion and protector, could only watch, as surprised and unprepared as the West, from the sideline.

However, another significant event occurred in 1979, and this was China's own (brief) invasion of Vietnam. Having been North Vietnam's ally in the war against the US and the US-supported regime in the south, the Chinese now found themselves embroiled in conflict with the unified state it had helped to create. The invasion was brief. The Vietnamese essentially embarrassed and defeated the Chinese forces. Battle-hardened by years of struggle against the US, the Chinese were simply more of the same. But that was precisely the problem. China was behaving like a giant from the First World. It was not championing this part of the Third World at all. After 1979, the theory was never really mentioned again. This did not mean the Chinese abandoned the principle of solidarity with the emerging world. China simply realised it could not automatically be its leader. China also realised it had a lot to learn about the complexities and the ambitions of this world. Its ambitions might not coincide with Chinese ambitions; might even, in the case of the Vietnamese, run counter to Chinese ambitions.

Learning about Africa

Zhou Enlai, despite his stirring speech at Bandung, and despite his later adroit dealings with Kissinger, was far from a flawless diplomat. A visit to Africa in 1963 left him highly embarrassed as the Africans rejected his talk of revolution. It was the last thing the recently independent states sought. They sought stability.

China made mistakes towards Africa, just as Africa made many mistakes for itself as the continent, divided finally into 55 states – but having as many as 2000 historical, cultural and linguistic sub-divisions – learned about statehood as quickly as possible, especially as colonial powers who were weakened by World War II scrambled to get out almost as they, with more avarice, once scrambled to get in; and got out without preparing overmuch apparatus

for the government and public administration of the suddenly independent states.

Nigeria had its bloody civil war at the end of the 1960s. Congo fell apart almost from the beginning in the early 1960s. In those countries where the colonial powers refused to get out – as Portugal refuse to decolonise Angola, bloody wars of liberation erupted, fought by competitive liberation movements. In Angola, the Chinese backed the wrong movement. The one supported by the Soviets (and a Cuban army) won. In Zimbabwe, the Chinese backed the right horse and supported Mugabe's armed struggle against white rule. But this meant not only long-lasting friendships – as Zimbabwe has always maintained with China since independence in 1980 – but fast diplomatic footwork to repair relations with those who had won without Chinese help; indeed, had won despite Chinese hinderance as in the case of Angola.

Although, as noted above, China had begun providing developmental assistance to Africa very shortly after Bandung, it is the case that China began a new phase of such assistance – very much tied to future trading partnerships and resource expropriation – only after the liberation era drew to a close; that is, in the 1990s, when South Africa finally attained majority rule under Nelson Mandela and the ANC. It also took China a good ten years after Deng Xiaoping's formal enunciation of the 'four modernisations' in 1978 to get its industrial machine up and running so that it could indeed manufacture commodities for trade and require mineral and petroleum resources of the scale Africa could provide. The removal of political tensions with the US, together with the diplomatic freedoms this allowed, were also important for the Chinese sense of globalisation that, from this period, began to alarm the Western world.

And, having a seat on the UN Security Council – within the concert at last – and realising what this meant, placated all the Chinese conceits about being the 'central kingdom' despite all the years of being marginalised.

Prelude to the New World

Despite the lapsing of the Three World Theory, the aspiration towards a leadership role never fully disappeared in China. As we shall see in a later chapter, this was to be accomplished by economic diplomacy and not political diplomacy. Even so, the enunciation of the theory; together with US diplomatic recognition of China, leading to the UN Security Council seat; and the success of the 'four modernisations' established an era of Chinese prosperity and a peculiar form of Chinese globalisation as its reach began to extend to all corners.

The role of Africa in all of this was pivotal –although it must be stressed that Western alarm about the Chinese purchase of so much economic influence in the continent is born of very demeaning analysis. Firstly, the influence was literally purchased. China did not forcibly colonise Africa as Europe had done. China did not support Apartheid for the sake of mineral expropriation as the US had done. Above all, Africa was not some innocent 'dumb black continent' that could not make choices for itself and for its own advantage. China had often to negotiate hard for its entry-points to Africa. It did so with a new economic model – what might loosely be called the 'Shanghai model', as opposed to a 'Washington model' based on the political imperatives and economic conditionality of the West. The 'Shanghai model' was conditionality-lite, as generous front-loading of liquidity and development projects and funds, preceded Chinese expropriation of mineral and petroleum resources.

If the Africans often drove hard bargains, despite Western fears of African guilelessness and naivety, it must be said that the Chinese themselves often configured Africa in a patronising and superior manner. This was especially true of private Chinese corporations that could be appallingly naïve and racist in their views of how to operate in an African context. For instance appalling Chinese management of Zambian mines led to many deaths of local workers without proper health and safety provisions. This approach extended to a value system that underpinned the official Chinese model.

Even so, the experience and the gains of working in Africa helped the Chinese in their plans for the future. This, as noted above, will be discussed in a later chapter. For now, Africa provided a dawn, a prelude for China.

The Confucian Idealism of the Shanghai Model

The West has always paraded, alongside its largesse, sometimes as a condition for receiving largesse, values of democracy, plurality and transparency. The Chinese largesse has been depicted as bribery and value-free. In fact, what is probably at work is the Confucian ethic of *guanxi*, very loosely translated as reciprocation. However, this is reciprocation in a chain of vertical hierarchies. Whereas Western values in their purest form are horizontal, as in a democracy, Confucian values are not. Respect and obeisance flow up, as from a subject to an emperor. However, provision and care *must* flow down; otherwise the emperor would lose the mandate of Heaven. Moreover, the higher personage must not only cause value to flow down, he must do so *first*, and, if the recipient below is particularly weak (or underdeveloped) the flow down must be magnificently generous. This says two things: the Chinese view of the African recipient is (perhaps unconsciously) of a weaker and demonstrably less developed entity; the Chinese frontloading of agreements with copious 'sweeteners' may be seen as part of the Chinese responsibility in a hierarchical arrangement – even when all the rhetoric is about equal partnerships. We have seen how, in the Three World Theory, the underpinning ethos was one of Chinese leadership and, implicitly, superiority.

This sense of leadership was, in a very true sense, an expression of Chinese Realism as an approach to international relations. The country considered it had been powerless. This was a huge psychological shock after millennia of being powerful. Now, it considered it was on the cusp of being powerful again. But, because of its era of humiliation, it had a genuine – if Confucian – sense of solidarity with others who were emerging from the same condition. It was an empathetic idealism mixed with Realism, mixed with the same cultural aloofness that had led China into peril a century before. This time, however, with the world's resources at its command, it was sure it would win.

A Meditation

The Chinese case suggests that cultural appreciation becomes important to the understanding of foreign policy – so to the English School's stress on history, and the Copenhagen School's stress on discursive formations, we should add a stress on cultural formations; in the case of China, these would be Confucian; but they would certainly also be, in the English School sense, fully historical, given the intimate memory and recall of the century of humiliation by the imperial powers. The post-World War II US behaviour towards China would have been nothing but a continuing echo of that.

The breakthrough with the US, occasioned largely by Kissinger and Zhou, was intuitive and, insofar as an intuitive actor can be a 'rational' one, was one without the panoply on either side of the apparatus of governmental foreign policy formulation with all its organisational processes, and certainly without its repertoire responses. There simply was no repertoire in this case.

There is a further example of this in Africa, as we shall see in the next chapter, in which Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda entered talks with Apartheid South Africa's F.W. de Klerk in 1989 without any 'rational' preparation, policy briefs, profile briefs on de Klerk at all. For Kaunda, unadvised by either his Ministry of Foreign Affairs or his own State House personnel, it was a 'rationality' formed entirely from intuition and his faith in the moral force of equality and the desire for peace.

In the case of Africa, China set about a lengthy courtship and is receiving, and hopes to receive a lengthy payback as long-term resource agreements come to fruition. Much of this was born of a Chinese empathy for Africa's own humiliation at the hands of the imperial powers, and Zhou Enlai as early as 1956 made almost a fetishistic point about Chinese non-intervention in the affairs of others. This was simultaneously an observation of the foundation tenet of Westphalianism, and also a commitment to Africa that China would not be like the great powers who came to the continent in the 18th and 19th centuries. As we shall see, however, the reformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union in 2000 saw the adoption of the principle of non-indifference. It is a principle that has been patchily and selectively, perhaps merely conveniently observed – in the face of the turmoil and slaughters that continue in certain parts of Africa to this day. But the Chinese, wedded to a stance from the mid-20th century, have nothing to say to the formal African stance of the 21st century. Perhaps once again, looking backwards might deny China a chance that comes from looking forward.

Finally, there should be a note about Chinese foreign policy formulation being subjected to the push and pull, in

Graham Allison's terms, of different organisations in the official Chinese establishment – all seeking purchase on foreign affairs. There are the organised arms of government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself, and the State Council of the Prime Minister's Cabinet; we can say that the research arms, particularly of the Ministry, have hitherto been weak: there are the foreign policy organs of the People's Liberation Army; and there are, above all, the foreign policy committees of the Chinese Communist Party. Increasingly, as we shall see, Chinese financial institutions command a major say. Of them all, however, the party organs are decisive. And no one knows how they work. In the absence of a figure like Zhou Enlai – and he was properly and purposefully 'inscrutable', as much for the sake of his own political survival as to keep 'his cards close to his chest' – there is no character or personality who may be said to carry a powerful personal ethos into the global realm. To this extent, Kissinger had it easy; his successors today, in seeking to decipher and understand anything, have a rocky ride.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where 'post' was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).