

The Year of the Tiger

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# The Year of

The sleeping tiger, China, is slowly rousing. Soon it will be fully awake and looking to reassert itself as the top cat in the Asia-Pacific.

Australia must be willing to allow China its place in the sun, argues MARTIN STUART-FOX.

**O**f all the changes sweeping the Asia-Pacific region as the 21st century approaches, none will have greater impact, not least for Australia, than those occurring in the People's Republic of China (PRC). How China's modernisation proceeds, how political power is exercised, whether and how regional tensions within China are contained, how China interacts with neighbouring countries – all these raise considerable uncertainty for the future of the region. Little wonder that how to deal with China is increasingly occupying analysts, policy advisers, statesmen and politicians throughout the Asia-Pacific. While distance provides Australia with some insulation from the security arena of Northeast and even Southeast Asia, our own future hinges crucially on events in both these regions. An aggressive China could threaten our access to vital sea lanes and disrupt trading relations.

Over the next few years, China's foreign policy will be closely tied to its domestic priorities of maintaining internal political stability and national unity to build a modern, technologically

advanced society. A stable international environment conducive to ever-growing trade is essential if China is to pursue its open-door approach to economic development. Thus China's diplomatic priority is to maintain "friendly and good relations with surrounding countries".<sup>1</sup> Where China does have a territorial dispute with regional states – as exists, for example, over the Spratly Islands – its stated desire is to solve the matter peacefully.

On the broader stage of international diplomacy, China proclaims a global foreign policy which aims to build relations of mutual respect with all countries, whether developed or developing. Such relations are based on two essential principles: non-interference in the internal affairs of other nation states and anti-hegemonism. Whereas Chinese opposition to hegemonism in the past was more narrowly focused on the superpowers – the US and the former Soviet Union – or on a particular regional power, notably Vietnam, anti-hegemonism now seems raised to the status of a general principle that can be used to criticise all forms of interference or undue influence exerted by one nation over another.

With regard to the international community, China portrays itself as a respon-

sible actor, cooperating with other permanent members of the Security Council. As proof of its good intentions, China points to its membership of the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), even though Taiwan is also a member, as well as its readiness to join the World Trade Organisation, its signature of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and its cooperation with other powers during the Gulf War and in the Middle East peace process. China today goes out of its way to proclaim itself as peaceful and cooperative; a country without hegemonic, political or ideological designs on any other state or region.

So much for the image China works hard to project. There is, however, another reality not easily overlooked. The pace of China's modernisation is startling. By the second quarter of the next century China is predicted to become the largest economy in the world. Already China's increasing economic muscle is translating into an increased military might with a striking range beyond its borders. Worrying also is China's claim to all the islands in the South China Sea which astride vital shipping lanes. Control of these would not only give Beijing strategic leverage but

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would point Chinese power south towards Southeast Asia. China is also seen by regional states as increasingly assertive and nationalistic in forcing a solution to the Cambodian problem and supporting Burma's reactionary and repressive military regime. Behind the benign face of Chinese anti-hegemonism, many discern the reality of a regional hegemon in the making.

Despite protestations, is this what China actually seeks? I believe so. But to assess what this means for China's regional relations, we must take into account both the deeply-held presuppositions of the Chinese worldview and historical precedent. Moreover, to assess possible implications for Australian security, we have to understand how other countries, especially those to our near north, are likely to react to China as rising regional hegemon.

No people is more aware of its history than the Chinese. The very length and continuity of China's past is a cause for pride. No other early civilisation is so organically linked to a modern nation state as is the China of 3000 years ago to the PRC. Historical consciousness is integral to Chinese culture. Until the 19th century, the Chinese had every reason to see their country as the centre of the world, the Middle Kingdom. As Chinese population, power and territory expanded, imperial domination was expressed in cultural terms. Chinese cultural superiority relegated other peoples to the status of tributary powers whose ambassadors duly recognised China's greatness. Other peoples might have their kings, whose subordinate status was gra-

ciously recognised by the Chinese court but in the Chinese worldview there was and could be only one Son of Heaven.

In this context, we can understand the devastating and deeply humiliating impact of Western imperialism on China. The agony of enduring submission to Western arrogance, insensitivity and racial superiority reached a climax in the even more blatant arrogance, brutality and overt racism of the Japanese invasion and occupation. Only with the conclusion of civil war in 1949 could Mao Zedong claim at last that the Chinese people had stood up.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party drew deeply from China's past, and the lesson of history was obvious: China was strong when unified, weak when divided. From unification came strength and from strength came superiority. But superiority could not simply be claimed: it had also to be formally recognised. It was recognition by inferiors that provided the superior status implicit in the hierarchical construction of Chinese social relations, from family to clan to nation to, what we would now call, the international order. Crucially the tributary system accorded recognition of status in return for which the Chinese accepted certain obligations of protection and conferred trading rights.

As a nation state in the present world system, status still remains of central importance to China. Time and again Chinese authorities have referred to China's "rightful place in the world". Chinese foreign policy has, in an important sense, been motivated by the desire for "status enhancement".<sup>2</sup> This, accord-

ing to political scientist Sheng Lijun, derives from a "strong sense of status discrepancy". These discrepancies exist: between China's glorious past and its present relatively backward state; between the belief of China's leaders in their country's importance and the recognition accorded it by the world community; between China's pretensions to exert political influence and power and its relatively weak economic base and military capacity; and between China's current power and influence and how it believes these will be enhanced in the future. The first of these Sheng describes as "traditionalist" and is deeply historical and cultural. The second rankles the Chinese but can be overcome by closing the third gap through developing the Chinese economy and boosting its military might. But overcoming the last discrepancy is what will shape the direction of Chinese foreign policy.

Sheng's arguments are particularly convincing in relation to China's development of nuclear weapons. Compare, for example, China's repeated justification that only if it possessed nuclear weapons could it be considered a great power with India's surreptitious development of a nuclear capacity, not primarily to become a great power, but to assure its military edge over Pakistan. China's proclaimed leadership of the Third World is another example of striving for status. Even such disasters as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were justified as strengthening China for its historic task of resuming its rightful place in the world. What Mao tried to achieve through politics, Deng Xiaoping



Pictures courtesy AAP and Reuters



more realistically has sought to achieve through his program of modernisation. Throughout, though, the goal of great power status remained the same.

Historically, European countries responded to the rise of hegemonic powers (France under Napoleon, Germany under the Kaiser then Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin) by constructing a coalition of opposing states to create a "balance of power". So deeply engrained is this American and European strategic thinking that it has become accepted as the only realistic and rational response.

Balance of power has never, however, been part of the thinking of East or Southeast Asian kingdoms with respect to China. The Middle Kingdom was always recognised as enjoying permanent superior status. Never as *primus inter pares* in a concert of kingdoms. There was never any question of creating some alliance of kingdoms to counter-balance the might of China, nor did any notion of equality enter into what were hierarchical relationships. What took the place of balance of power as a strategic means of ensuring some degree of security was ceremonial recognition of supe-

rior status, which carried with it an obligation to afford protection and keep the peace along China's southern frontier.

Over the centuries the tributary system has worked well. Chinese armies rarely invaded the kingdoms of Southeast Asia and when they did were as often as not defeated and expelled, especially by the Vietnamese. After each such victory, however, the victors would move to re-assert their subordinate status. A tribute mission would be despatched to Beijing to gain imperial endorsement often of the very leaders who had defeated imperial armies. And again they would be accepted as loyal tributaries. What was important for the Chinese was to re-establish what they considered to be the proper hierarchy of status, as much moral and cultural as economic and military. For those who took the long journey to Beijing to prostrate themselves before the Son of Heaven, it was a relatively small price to pay as insurance against renewed Chinese invasion.

The impact of European imperialism in the nineteenth century, coinciding as it did with the decline of the Qing dynasty in China, put an end to the tributary system. Despite appeals for help – for

example from Vietnam in 1879 – China was unable to protect its tributaries in mainland Southeast Asia from falling under the domination of European powers, or Korea to Japan. When China did finally stand up again in 1949, it was in a Cold War world dominated by super-power rivalry and European notions of balance of power. Fear of communism and the power disparity that existed between China and the United States was enough to convince some Southeast Asian governments to accept the need to contain China. Others, even if anti-communist, were reluctant to be drawn into anti-Chinese alliances. Neither Cambodia nor Burma could be prevailed upon to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Remarkably, of SEATO's eight members, only Thailand and the Philippines were Southeast Asian states. Ironically it was wound up following communist victories in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, just when it might be thought it was most needed to prevent the dreaded "domino effect". But by then much else had changed.

After 1975, state-to-state relations regained priority over party-to-party relations in China's foreign policy. Gratify-



ingly, China now exercises far more influence in the region than it did while it was exporting revolution. In fact, in the crises in Cambodia and Burma, China, rather than the US or Japan, was the key player. It was China which took the lead in opposing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and armed the Khmer Rouge to oppose the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh. And it was Chinese support that ensured peace. As for Burma, it was Chinese support for the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that frustrated Western attempts to convince the Burmese military to relinquish power to a democratically-elected civilian government.

China's growing influence in dictating the course of events in mainland Southeast Asia has hardly gone unremarked by the countries of the region. Thai foreign policy is probably the best weathervane for assessing changing power relations. When Britain was the dominant power in Southeast Asia, the Thai were pro-British; during the Second World war they were allied to Japan; and after the war they were pro-American. Since 1975 Thailand has developed warm relations with the PRC. For the Thai, to have good relations

with the dominant power in the region is as natural as it is for Europeans to think about power balancing: it is simply the rational thing to do to ensure its security.

Such a response reflects deeply established patterns of thought. In re-establishing Thai relations with the PRC so amicably in 1975, former Thai prime minister Kukrit Pramoj said simply: "I used the Thai manner of approaching – the idea that you are older and better".<sup>3</sup> In other words, Kukrit accorded the Chinese their desired status. What the Thai put down to their natural politeness, the Chinese interpreted as proper deference.

Even more instructive is the recent course of Chinese-Vietnamese relations. After Vietnam overthrew the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, a regime the Chinese had few illusions about but considered an ally, China determined to teach Vietnam a lesson. The language alone is indicative of Chinese thinking: Vietnam was to be treated like an errant child who must learn to conform to parental wishes. It took a decade for Chinese pressure, happily in concert with the ASEAN states and the US, to force a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, and for Hanoi to appreciate

the folly of opposing China. The eventual re-establishment of proper, if not cordial, relations between the two states was a classic exercise in traditional Chinese-Vietnamese diplomacy. In September 1990, a secret summit meeting was held in the Chinese city of Chengdu to "normalise" relations. A formal summit in Beijing in November the following year was seen by the Chinese as essential to restore the proper hierarchical status relationship between the two countries. As it was explained to the author by a young Vietnamese diplomat: "We made a mistake by relying on Russia against China, and we had to apologise". It's not a mistake the Vietnamese will make lightly again, given the realities of geography and power.

The rise of China is already leading ruling elites in mainland Southeast Asia to think of China as the future regional hegemon in a way they could never imagine of Japan.<sup>4</sup> In part this has been due to the low diplomatic, and even lower military, profile that Japan has maintained since the Second World War. This apparent readiness to accord China such a role, even before its power really warrants it, draws on historical experi-



ence and on a well-founded belief that China will never rest until it has achieved its rightful status.

It is in mainland Southeast Asia that China has traditionally exercised the most direct and lasting influence and sought recognition of superior status. The Malay world, especially Indonesia, is less sympathetic to Chinese desire for status than the mainland states. This may suggest the possibility of some island versus mainland power balance, allowing China to exert hegemony over those states with which it shares a common border, while leaving Indonesia and the Philippines free to make common cause with the US. But this would fatally divide ASEAN and destroy its potential to act as a regional counterweight to China.

Given mainland Southeast Asia's historically-ingrained "strategic culture"<sup>5</sup> and burgeoning economic ties with China, ASEAN as a whole is likely to move towards according Beijing status recognition. Preservation of ASEAN solidarity is thus paradoxically another reason why a "balance of power" response to growing Chinese might is unlikely. Already there is reluctance by Southeast Asian states to criticise China. None condemned Beijing over the Tian

An Men massacre. Nor did they during the crisis the PRC manufactured over Taiwan's first presidential election. Both were considered China's internal affairs – as is how the Chinese wanted them viewed – even though the Taiwan crisis carried grave implications for regional security. The ASEAN Regional Forum seeks only strategic "engagement" with China, a notion as universally acceptable as it is vague.

So what does the future hold? If early in the next century China seems certain to become the hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, and the strategic culture of mainland Southeast Asian states precludes any balance-of-power response, where does this leave Australia? Standing most in the way of Chinese ambitions is of course the US. But whereas Asian nations generally welcome a continued American presence in the region, they won't join an American alliance. Rather they will depend on US political will for a continued presence. Despite having real economic and strategic interests in Asia, Washington may be reluctant in future to confront a much stronger China alone, as it did during the Taiwan crisis. So it would be unwise for any regional state to base its security solely on an alliance

with the US. Even Australia has learned not to put too much weight on the ANZUS treaty.

Reliance on super powerful friends is no longer an option for Australia, even though relations with the US remain close. To substitute a US alliance in "containing" China for hard-headed analysis of Australia's regional security would be disastrous. To date, Australian governments have been careful to stay in step with our Southeast Asian neighbours and call for "engagement" of China with the region, rather than backing some form of containment. This is sensible diplomacy for it encourages a continuing regional security dialogue that makes room for Chinese interests.

By historic right, the Chinese demand deference. Such deference, however, cannot simply be shown in private, which in the Asian context counts as normal politeness. It is the public face of deference that is important for the Chinese. This must extend beyond joint communiques and public statements. Governments in Southeast Asia are likely to act to meet Chinese expectations, no matter how they might privately view the relationship. We should not, however, condemn this as kowtowing to Beijing.



Rather we should see it as a tactical element in the diplomatic strand of regional security discourse – one that Australia, too, may usefully adopt.

As Southeast Asian states well appreciate, however, according China pre-eminent status is but half of its security strategy. The other is a strong defence capability. The recent arms build-up in Southeast Asia has been in response not to tensions between member states of ASEAN but to the diminished American presence, collapse of the Soviet Union, and the growing might of China. Security is a two-track process, using diplomacy backed by arms. Given that Asian players' strategic culture draws on entirely different historical precedents and regional dynamics, it is highly unlikely, therefore, that the ASEAN states will unite into a closely-integrated security organisation like NATO. The mainland states are too vulnerable and would conduct their own diplomacy with China. Geography and religion would force Indonesia and the Philippines to stand in markedly different relationships to China than either Vietnam or the Buddhist mainland states. Indonesia and the Philippines, on the other hand, are less likely to accommodate Chinese ambi-

tions but wouldn't necessarily join a balance-of-power coalition unless the Chinese showed extreme aggression. In this context, Australia's bilateral security agreement with Indonesia makes excellent sense.

In the end, Australia should avoid the simplistic option of striking an alliance with the US in the event that China becomes regional hegemon, much less be party to any containment strategy. Instead we should adopt an alternative approach to regional security through accommodating China's desire for status as far as possible, taking account of the strategic cultures of our neighbours, and developing a network of bilateral agreements that would operate in concert during any serious regional security

threat. Adopting a diplomatically deferential "Asian" approach to China backed by bilateral agreements and a strong self-defence capacity, however, demands subtle and multi-layered diplomacy. It promises, though, strategic security preferable to and more durable than any externally-orchestrated balance-of-power framework designed to frustrate China's status ambitions.

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#### Footnotes

1. Qimao Chen, "New Approaches in China's Foreign Policy" *Asian Survey* 33 (1993): 242.
2. Sheng Lijun, "China's Foreign Policy Under Status Discrepancy, Status Enhancement" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 17 (1995): 101-125.
3. Quoted in Michael Vatikiotis, "Ties That Bind" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 January 1996.
4. Gerald Segal is right to maintain: "East Asian traditions suggest that China will be unwilling to accept a subordinate role to Japan". Gerald Segal, "The Coming Confrontation between China and Japan?" *World Policy Journal* 10 (1993): 28.
5. Cf. Desmond Ball, "Strategic Culture in the Asia-Pacific Region" *Security Studies*, 3 (1993): 44-74.
6. Northeast Asia is a different matter, for there both Japan and Russia are directly involved. For a recent sophisticated discussion focusing on Northeast, rather than Southeast, Asia, see Douglas T. Stuart and William T. Tow, "A US Strategy for the Asia-Pacific" *Adelphi Papers* no. 299 (1995).