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CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUTURE
GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF THE P.R.C .
A SURVEY ON THE CHINESE VIEWPOINT ON ISSUES OF
PRESENT AND FUTURE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

Author: Silvia Sartori
Supervisor: Kristina Jönsson

ABSTRACT

The intention of present thesis was to grasp a genuinely Chinese perspective on issues concerning international foreign politics and world affairs. A hypothetical-deductive method was used based on a questionnaire submitted to thirty-eight academicians of diverse academic backgrounds and age groups.

The overall perception is that world affairs and regional politics are overwhelmingly dominated by the USA which is though the major Chinese foreign policy partner. Russia is the most significant regional partner whereas Japan is unanimously considered aggressive and ambitious, especially because of its alleged attempts to remilitarize.

The Chinese consider as the major threat the unsettled Taiwanese issue whereas terrorism and nuclear threats are a far marginal matter for their security, which would improve by strengthening multilateralism and regional integration. The UN and the European *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* appear as a significant model to look at to improve regional integration and stability for reasons of economic growth, regional economic integration and peace.

In Northeast Asia a peaceful settlement of the Korean issue is advocated and China is considered as the major regional power. The international community is perceived as positively accepting this “peaceful” Chinese preeminence but signs of worries are detected among Asian neighbors.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Background

The three actors which currently affect the most the security setting of East Asia, i.e. Japan, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, are going through substantial changes whose outcomes will be the most determinant factors for the future regional security.

Japan, the biggest investor in East Asia, is in the middle of one of its deepest national identity crisis. Before being able of taking a long-term clear international stance, it has to overcome its "national stagnation" and try to define what role it wants to play with the rest of the world. The first and most-immediate sphere this decision will be relevant for is apparently the remilitarization issue.

The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, is undoubtedly emerging as a world economic giant but its political weight does not seem to develop in the same uncontroversial, far-reaching and determined way. China a poor tradition with regard to "active and prompt diplomacy" and crisis-management and it is not clear whether Beijing has a clear long-term foreign policy strategy, at least encompassing the "Sino-centric world".

North Korea instead is still trying to keep afloat the delicate balance between reform and survival, aware as it is that too many reforms would result in the regime demise but no

reform would bring the country to a disastrous collapse likewise. The main problem regarding the North Korean crisis rests less on the attempt of actually replacing the current regime than on the internationally shared desire not to disintegrate the country and to keep it alive although “in a more human way”.

At a time of increasingly fast and remarkable world integration, to East Asia it seems still very hard to strengthen regional integration and go beyond the very good but strictly bilateral political agreements. The regional fear of “the Chinese threat” and of a possible Japanese remilitarization, the Sino-Japanese sensitive political issues still unsolved, the local territorial disputes are just some of the obstacles that seem to prevent the regional countries from achieving genuine, sound stability and security concert. This is though all the more necessary now that international challenges such as terrorism require solid international cooperation and not just country-to-country alliances. This means, moreover, redefining and assessing the relationship with the US, which need Japan and China at least as much as Tokyo and Beijing need Washington.

The dilemma rests exactly on the contradiction of a region (which is all the more the most promising in economic terms for the near future) that seems still entrapped in its traditional controversies right when global integration increases and international cohesion is mostly needed. Within such a weak framework, fears of domino effects due to the North Korean misbehavior and of a regional and then globalized arm-race appear not only likely to occur but, even worse, too tangled to be peacefully handled.

2. Aim of the research

The objective of the present thesis is to investigate a Chinese viewpoint on issues of current and future geopolitics, regarding both the Asia Pacific Region and the world at large.

The Western world is used to listen to and read reviews and predictions about Northeast Asia which are regularly made by Westerners and consequently by means of Western concepts and points of view. No matter how aware such authors are that their cultural background is deeply different from the one of the countries they are “explaining”, they are inevitably still adopting Western lens to see and screen what happens elsewhere. Even when they admittedly make use of Asian concepts and values, their perspective will likely be still “civilization–biased” and will never acquire a completely genuine Asian perspective.

Hence the wish of investigating how locals perceive these issues happening “at their home”. I will just stick to the Chinese viewpoint for reasons of practical feasibility and in particular I will refer to what a sample of academicians think about those issues.

What I intend to understand is a Chinese perspective about current foreign relations at large and in particular about geopolitical scenarios in Northeast Asia. How do the interviewed Chinese perceive the international arena? What is their impression about major international actors? How do they feel to be perceived by such actors? What are the major challenges and goals of the present world and regional foreign policy? Which path should Beijing’s diplomacy embark on? How would they define the present world in

terms of security and peace? By answering to such questions, the Chinese sample will provide their own local viewpoint on matters otherwise usually depicted by a Western and “West-centric” perspective.

I argue that it is noticeably important to grasp Chinese opinions in order to be able of adequately understand and handle major global issues. A correct and possibly complete comprehension of all actors’ view is the necessary and priority requirement for effective international cooperation and it is all the more fundamental given the poverty of materials available on such issues.

3. Theoretical framework

Once set the aim of grasping a genuine Chinese viewpoint on IR issues, I decided to describe it along a fil rouge. This is constituted by an idea provided by Wang Jisi in his essay “International Relations Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Chinese Perspective”. In the conclusion of his survey he states: “Foreign policy reflects the culture of the society creating it. Chinese culture is not a coherent whole” (Wang, 1994:504).

Hence, I decided to investigate whether the Chinese foreign policy, filtered by a genuinely Chinese perspective, is incoherent.

To fulfill my goal, I took into account several issues and nuances of current international relations. I consulted a diverse variety of bibliography as well as of current press in order to select the best issues to cover. Also in this stage I came to observe the disproportion

between the amount of data provided by Western scholars compared to that ensuing of Asian sources. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Wang himself starts his essay by reminding that “analytical works written by PRC scholars on Chinese foreign policy comparable to those by Western scholars are hardly available”.

Nevertheless, I argue that foreign policy is an excellent branch to test the “Chinese social coherence” given Beijing’s increasing involvement in international politics. Unable and unwilling to keep a feeble participation to world affairs, China is contributing more and more to international political issues, both to better serve its domestic interests as well as to assert its leverage as an international Great Power. As indicated by Professor Harding, “In the 1990s China is attempting to reduce geopolitical tensions with as many nations as possible, so that it can devote all its resources and energies to the problems of modernization and reform, diversify its economic relationships, and preserve its strategic independence” (Harding, 1994:388).

Thus, three ideas lead my research: “perception”, “Chinese foreign policy” and “coherence”.

The idea of perception I refer to throughout my survey is part of what Steven I. Levine names Chinese “informal ideology”. Taken apart the traditional communist ideology (that constitutes the “formal ideology”), he detects the existence of a far more charismatic form of ideology connecting the Chinese people. This is indeed an “informal ideology”, otherwise known as “culture” because it gathers all those values and habits that are unstated but shared and that determine the behavior of actors.

When it comes to the “culture of perception”, the Chinese informal ideology according to Levine rests on the following pillars:

1. the greatness of the Chinese people and nation
2. the Chinese right to a better fate and to a compensatory treatment for past injustices
3. the Chinese right to be treated as a Great Power
4. the untouchable Chinese national sovereignty
5. the Chinese immutable and universal values determining foreign policy attitudes and practices (Levine, 1994: 32-45).

Regarding Chinese foreign policy, I rely on Harding’s statement that the post-Mao Chinese foreign policy challenge is: “How to make the outside world, including the world of international organizations, safe for China’s entry into modernity” (Harding, 1994:394). To this aim, according to Harding, China is intentionally changing “from a revolutionary system-transforming actor to a neo-realist system-maintaining status quo actor” (Harding, 1994:409).

The underlying methodological concept of all this research is “coherence”, as defined by Aristotle’s coherence theory of truth, according to which a group of statement is true only if consistent with previously indicated statements. Coherence is the hallmark of a series of statements deriving from an axiom and logically connected to each other with no contradiction.

4. Methodology

The aim of my research being that of exploring ex novo a genuine Chinese viewpoint on geopolitical issues, I decided to make use of a questionnaire that I submitted to thirty-eight academicians.

The sample included both university students and professors whose academic background was heterogeneous and not necessarily IR. Age groups were different too. I divided the sample into three major age groups, one gathering people in their twenties (age group A), another representing people from thirty to fifty (age group B) and the last one including the over fifty (age group C). Interviewees were asked about their age when they received their questionnaire. 81.6 percent of the sample belongs to age group A, 10.6 percent to age group B and the remaining 7.9 percent to age group C.

I came in touch with these interviewees during a monthly stay in Shanghai at Fudan University. There I was supervised by Professor Zhu Mingquan of the Dept. of International Politics who helped me considerably in finding the sample. I intentionally wanted interviewees to come from diverse academic backgrounds in order to get a more complete and reliable outcome. Putting questions on foreign policy to academicians of the IR environment would have limited the ensuing analysis in that it would have been just the perspective of professionals daily dealing with these issues and accurately updated about them. Instead, by widening the sample, I could get an overall image nurtured by the contribution of ordinary academicians as well. As a country's population is made of extremely diverse people who contribute all together to their national public opinion regardless of the quantity and quality of the opinions at their disposal, I thought I

would get closer to such a national image by enlarging my selection criteria. I had to stick though to academicians as a matter of practical feasibility. Being in the PRC for that short period and not speaking Chinese, the best way to carry out a scientific work was to rely on people I could talk to by means of a common language and who were already into research issues.

I thus drafted a questionnaire made of twenty-four questions and written in English. The vast majority of the sample could understand and speak fluently English, for those who could not my supervisor's assistant worked as translator. The commonality of the language between me and the interviewees was at the same time a benefit and a problem for the research. It was beneficial because we used a language that was "neutral" to both me and them as it was neither mother-tongue. But using a sample whose mother-tongue is not the one adopted in the research was detrimental to the extent that the meaning of words and concepts used both by me and by them could not coincide. It is a matter of light nuances and of sensitivity to language, as it is suffused with interpretation (Parker, 1999:2).

The questions were basically of two kinds. In most cases, questions were to be answered by ticking one up to three items listed. Interviewees just had to choose which of the given replies was the closer to their viewpoint. On the other hand, there were open questions where the sample was asked to freely provide a description of a geopolitical actor. These were basically the questions strictly regarding perception and thus I thought the answer would be far more correct if the interviewees were left free to word themselves the description. However, I came to notice that Chinese people were not used to this latter

sort of questions and found it quite peculiar and curious. Free phrasing of concepts was very unusual to the sample and demanded a lot of their time and attention.

Once gathered primary data, I analyzed the outcomes and detected major trends thereof.

One may argue that so few questions and such a restricted sample can not be enough to provide an accurate answer to my research question but to this regard some considerations have to be made.

First, the reliability of a qualitative study rests on “asking good questions during the data collection process”(Yin, 2003:59-60). My questions touched upon different aspects of diverse issues. They considered both how Chinese perceive the rest of the world and how they feel to be perceived by it.

Second, the sample involved people from different academic backgrounds, different age groups, different geographical origins and different experiences with the rest of the world. Students were indeed in Shanghai but not all of them came from the city, some came from the countryside, others from neighboring towns. Furthermore, 59 percent of the interviewees has never been either in Europe or in North America or in Japan, which is an important element in shaping their perception of these actors, their role and attitude.

Thus the sample was quite little but meanwhile very diversified at its inside with reference to several aspects. As my intention was to grasp a perception and to test an hypothesis by means of a case-study analysis, I think that my methodological basis and my selection criteria make for reliability.

I am aware though that all these issues and their reciprocal connections would require a longer analysis than the one allowed by a ten thousand words dissertation. The ambition is to provide a correct answer to the research question. Rather than being approximate and superficial, I prefer to touch here the main outcomes of my survey and to provide an answer to the research questions, leaving to additional research the task of studying secondary connections and trends.

5. Disposition

In the main part of the thesis I will describe the outcomes of the questionnaires and in the final conclusion I will link these results to investigate whether they are logically connected and whether they prove the reliability of the above-mentioned literary references.

To better appreciate the results of the survey, I intend to split the questionnaire topics into four main parts, each of which having a precise focus and not strictly following the order how the questions were submitted.

First, I will study what I call the “Chinese perceptions” at large, i.e. how the considered Chinese sample perceives the rest of the world and how it thinks China is perceived by it. I argue that this preliminary part represents the inexorable framework through which the global results can be viewed¹.

¹ The content of this part can be taken from answers to Questions 1, 4, 5, 6 and 13.

In the second part, “China and world politics”, I will go through the setting of Chinese foreign policy at large. I will touch upon both the current situation and the possible future scenarios².

Third, I will deal with the specific “Sino-Japanese relations” that stand for the most significant geopolitical axis in the region; hence the need for a special section devoted to the present health of this “partnership” and to its implications for future regional patterns of stability³.

Fourth, I will touch upon “China and Northeast Asia”, thus underlining a regional focus area. Here I will deal with local hot issues, Chinese desirable foreign policy initiatives and hints about the future scenarios in the region⁴.

² The questions constituting the source for this part are Questions 2, 7, 8, 10 and 12.

³ This chapter data come from answers to Questions 14 to 18.

⁴ Answers to Questions 3, 8, 9, 11 and 19 to 24 stand for the basis of this analysis.

CHINESE PERCEPTION OF THE FUTURE GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF THE P.R.C.

1. CHINESE PERCEPTIONS

1.1 How China perceives global politics actors

The sample was asked to describe how they perceive the following actors: the USA, Europe, Russia, Japan and the United Nations.

The perception the interviewees have about the United States is the clearer and neater: the American actor is depicted as a *hegemonic, powerful, strong, arrogant leader*⁵ of world affairs, *skillfully dominating* the global politics with an *imperialistic* approach. Chinese are doubtless that the US plays the central role in determining the course of present world politics and they differentiate on the reasons of this political hegemony, which they alternatively explain in terms of *richness, greed, power or arrogance*.

The perception of Europe is instead quite blur. The Old Continent is generally perceived as an *important* actor that is going through a process of evolution and is appreciated for its cooperative skills. A rising key player, Europe is sometimes conceived as independent but more often as a still passive partner of the US. Its valuable contribution to world peace is constantly remarked as well as its kind approach to world affairs, which even make of Europe a model Asia should look at, as 2.7 percent of the interviewees wrote.

⁵ I write in Italics the words the interviewees themselves chose to use.

Russia is mostly considered as a *declining* big actor, currently dealing with its domestic problems, first its insecurity and instability; to these, problems such as ambiguity, unreliability and passivity are added by a few interviewees. Nevertheless in Chinese eyes Russia remains a potentially *significant* world player, endowed with a noticeable power and strength. In spite of a general view of Russia as of a declining power, 34.4 percent of the definitions used by the interviewees depict an image of the former Cold War Power as of a *significant, big and strong* power, having a noticeable potential and slowly *recovering* to emerge on the international stage where it plays an *indispensable* role. Hence, the Chinese image of Russia is quite controversial, with people seeing its present instability as a sign of permanent decline and others looking at this precariousness as a transitory problem of a nevertheless strong international power.

With regard to Japan, the interviewed sample is unanimous: the unpleasant neighbor is first of all an *aggressive and ambitious* actor, *economically powerful* and generally *loyal* to the US, currently trying to be acknowledged as a major international player. *Foxy and challenging* as it is nowadays, it is *actively changing* on its way to a new growth and thus represents a *threat*.

That of the UN is a confused image, too. Mostly conceived as an important player when it comes to global mediation, balance and compromise-search, the international institution is both considered important, *necessary* and *strong* as well as *feeble, impotent, rhetorical* and by 12.5 percent of the interviewees even *useless*. The overall definitions used have a positive connotation, stressing the UN *legitimate* bargaining role but nonetheless half of them rather underlines how *limited, disabled, weak* and *declining* such

a role currently is. Thus we can assume that the ideal UN figure is positively appreciated whereas its empirical activity and modus operandi, especially with regards to recent events, is deeply criticized and skeptically trusted.

It is interesting to remark how the interviewees appreciate the mediating role both of the UN and of Europe at the light of the different missions of the two institutions. This appreciation is coherent with an outcome of Wang Jisi's analysis, who noted that "the present Chinese leadership has pursued a role of 'balancer' in world politics" (Wang, 1994:486). In other words, the interviewees' stress on the importance of the mediating role of the EU and UN in their arena confirms a Chinese attitude in dealing with foreign affairs: negotiating to find a satisfactory compromise is to them the most efficient avenue to a sound international stability.

1.2 How China feels to be perceived

The vast majority of the sample has the feeling that the international community perceives China as a *developing rising* power that is becoming *increasingly important* and *stronger*. 76.3 percent of the words used to describe this perception indeed refer to the *emerging, booming* and *changing* status of their homeland. 19 percent of the total definitions used mention adjectives such as *peaceful, gentle, promising, trustful, fair, responsible* and *pragmatic* that further convey a positive image that, according to Chinese, foreigners have about the Middle Empire. Thus, generally speaking the interviewees do not detect any sign of fear or criticism by foreign actors with regard to China. They do not specify though whether behind this acknowledgment the international community welcomes or is worried about such an amazing boom.

The impression is far more differentiated when it comes to how Asian neighbors are thought to perceive China. Four groups of definitions surface to this regard.

The largest one, summing up to 43.2 percent of the interviewees' answers, think the Asian neighbors see China as a *large, huge, powerful* and *strong* country, which is not only *significant* but even *dominant* and getting *stronger*.

Then follow with 24.3 percent those who perceive a sense of fear and threat in the neighbors' eyes. Behind the Chinese growth there would be a *worrying challenge*, a *threat* that is already evident politically whereas economically China is still regarded as *helpful*.

A third group does not go so far as to detect such a strong sense of threat: 18.9 percent argue the neighbors do not have a clear idea about China yet. China is *uncertain*, *potentially dominant and strong* but still quite weak.

The rest of the group is the one describing the neighbors' impression just by means of positive adjectives, such as *stable*, *cooperative*, *friendly* and *reliable*.

1.3 Chinese perception of security

When asked whether they perceive any international threat upon Chinese security, the interviewees split into two major groups. Apart from a small though significant number of people (13.1%) who do not know how to reply to this question, 44.7 percent replied by

denying any sense of threat whereas 42.1 admitted to feel threatened. The latter when asked what represented the source of such a threat list several items, the main one being the Taiwanese issue and the US interference in it (40%), followed by “the US” (20%) and “the Taiwanese separatism issue” (13.3%). Others mention terrorism, the US interest rate policy, the problem of oil sources and Japan as causes of threat but these reasons all together account for a mere 26.6 percent of the answers to the sources of international threat upon China.

1.4 How China perceives its international status

Another issue that I thought it would be important to investigate when it comes to Chinese foreign policy is the Chinese perception of its international acknowledgment. Known as it is that China has developed a “sense of victimization” as a consequence of its colonial past and especially of the Japanese imperialism, it is relevant to understand whether this syndrome has been overcome or not in order to comprehend what Chinese foreign policy makers are heading to and aiming at.

If they are still perceiving not to be properly acknowledged by the international community, Chinese are indeed more likely to develop and accelerate an ambitious and active role in strengthening the Chinese role in global affairs and in asserting the Chinese weight on the international stage. On the contrary, if they are satisfied with the current global consideration of the PRC, they are more likely to prioritize cooperative attitudes over demanding approaches.

Interviewees' opinions to this regard are very different. 13.1 percent of them does not know what to reply and the rest splits in quite an equal way among those who are complaining of and those who are happy with the current status internationally enjoyed by the PRC. To be more precise, the satisfied ones account to 44.7 percent of the total interviewees, whereas the discontented represent 42.1 of the global sample.

Some interviewees added an explanation to their reply and what we can argue on this basis is that China is satisfied with its political international recognition being a member of the UN Security Council whereas it still has a long way ahead with regard to economic international affirmation being still a developing country. An interviewee added that, apart from the political and economic sphere, the Chinese cultural potential is still not acknowledged. The rest of the world keeps judging China upon Western standards and does not conceive the existence of "a Chinese model" legitimated by the unique historical past of the PRC.

Conclusions

The picture ensuing of this first chapter demonstrates to be rooted on neat pillars logically connected to each other. The image the sample provides leaves no room for incoherence and let us draw some important conclusions.

First of all, the international arena is dominated by an arrogant hegemonic power, i.e. the United States. China has never approved of hegemonic attitudes and already Mao Zedong used to say that the Middle Empire would never seek hegemony. Besides, the American hegemony represents a threat to Beijing. Over the last years China has developed the

opinion that all international strategies that the US are conceiving are meant to slow down the Chinese development and to restrain somehow its potential at large (Saich, 2001:281).

The conviction emerged by these answers thus confirms the presence of this suspicion even to present days. In spite of the official launch of the “war on terrorism”, the PRC still believes that the American super-power is nurturing offensive plans against Beijing and the lack of valid alternatives to Washington’s hegemony does not help reducing the risks upon China. This explains why those interviewees that detect threats upon Chinese security inevitably connect them to the US and its claims in managing world and local affairs.

At light of these considerations, it follows a general appreciation of the European Union and the United Nations mission. Since these institutions embody the importance of mediation, compromise and negotiation in dealing with international relations, they gain the Chinese approval. Moreover, many interviewees express the wish that these institutions are able of strengthening their capacity of managing global affairs in order to reduce the arrogant hegemonic claims of single actors.

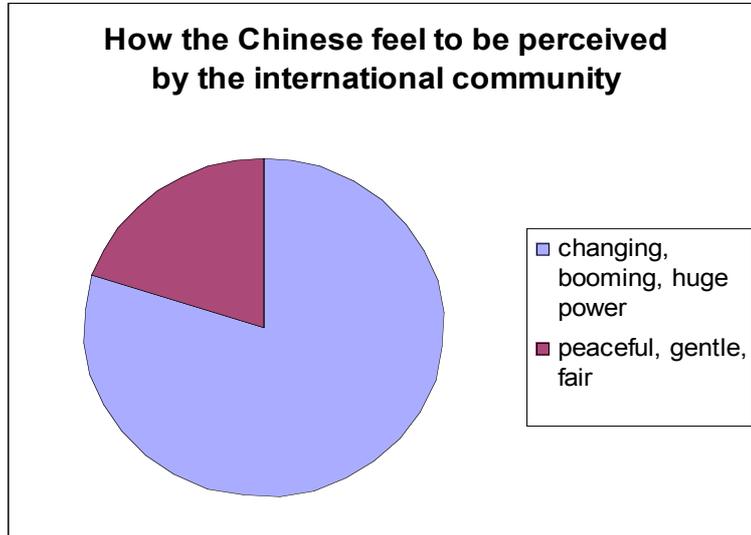
As to other important actors, Japan and Russia, the sample is consistent with Cao and Tang’s analysis on the Chinese relations with Tokyo and Washington. The two outstanding scholars of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences outlined that the empowerment of the American-Japanese relations has implied and contributed to a rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow (Cao and Tang, 2002:139). Not only China keeps claiming Japan for its unsettled historical faults, but it looks at it as to “the UK of

Asia”, closer to American than to Asian interests (Glosserman, 2003:108). According to Green’s viewpoint, instead, “Strong ties between Tokyo and Washington would increase United States leverage vis-à-vis China by deterring Beijing from any attempt to increase its own hegemony in the region through a strategy of separating the United States from its allies” (Glosserman, 2003:107).

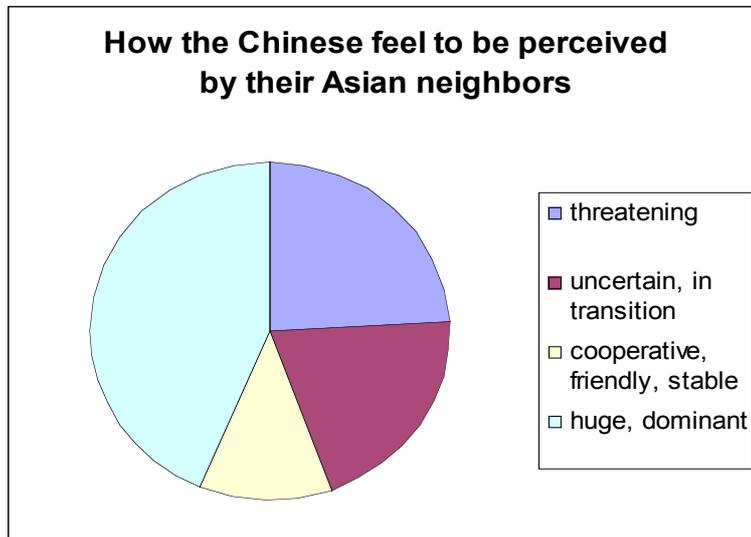
In addition to that, it is also true that the increasing importance of Russia to Chinese eyes is due to the growing Chinese need for energy resources and to the fact that Russia is anyway a nuclear power (Wang, 2002:32).

Another neat outcome of this first chapter is the clear differentiation of the Chinese passive perception according to the origin of the perceivers. By looking at the following graphs it is possible to visualize how differently the Chinese feel to be perceived when they are evaluated by the international community at large, compared to when they are observed by Asian neighbors.

Graph N. 1



Graph N. 2



There are two main outcomes ensuing of these graphs.

The first is that the international community's description is quite homogenous and does not include stark differences in descriptive terms. In a sense, the variety of replies can be measured on an ideal spectrum of definitions ranging from a positive observation of the Chinese growth potential up to the attention-concern to the huge dimensions of this same potential.

The replies about the Asian perceptions of China are instead not only far more diversified but can hardly be grouped into a unique spectrum. In this case, the answers underline different nuances. They touch upon issues of economic growth, potential challenge and threat, international attitudes, in addition to the features already indicated in the previous graph. Arguably, this self-evident difference in terms of passive perception is an important element in shaping Beijing's attitude towards foreign actors.

The same weight can be attached to the Chinese self-perception as an actor of the international arena. When asked whether they are satisfied or disappointed with the present acknowledgment enjoyed by the PRC in the international community, the interviewees though split in two quite equal groups. This is the only issue, in this chapter, that has not given birth to a major outstanding trend. When satisfaction was detected, it referred exclusively to the political status recognized to the PRC whereas criticism regarded its economic performance. However, the almost homogeneous bifurcation of the sample about this issues does not allow to draw a predominant conclusion.

2. CHINA AND WORLD POLITICS

2.1 China's partners in foreign policy

The interviewees were asked what they regard as China's current main partner in foreign policy at large. Fifty percent of the answers indicate the US as the country working the most with the PRC in shaping and managing global political affairs. 23.6 percent mentioned Europe, 18.4 percent Russia and the remaining 2.6 percent Japan.

This picture strengthens the image of a deeply rooted American presence, a potentially important Russian and European role as well as of a politically declining Japanese charisma, as already surfaced on the perceptions about world key-players.

2.2 China's perception of challenges

Consistently with the image depicted by previous analysis, the mostly ticked international challenge to the Chinese international status and role is indeed the "presence of a hegemonic power", marked by as many as 44.7 percent of the interviewees⁶. It goes without saying that such power refers to the US whose role in world politics seems to the Chinese dominant and overwhelming.

⁶ In the questions regarding challenges interviewees could tick up to three answers. Thus figures in percentage refer to the total amount of interviewees and not to the total number of answers provided.

Interestingly enough, the second order of factors equally considered as a challenge are “democratization” (as a source of instability) and “religious and ethnic conflicts”, followed by seven point percent by “poverty” and “environmental issues”, as to demonstrate how seemingly sensitive to environmental care Chinese are getting.

“Human rights issues” and “international economic relations” are then considered as a threat to Chinese world affirmation (21%), though more dangerous than “globalization”, “increasing global insecurity” and “weak international organizations” that are perceived as a challenge only by 15.7 percent of the interviewed sample.

What is more striking, especially because of its difference with Western countries’ perceptions, “terrorism” and “nuclear threats” represent two of the least marked sources of challenges to the Chinese. Only 13.1 percent of the interviewees listed these items among the threats likely to jeopardize China’s international role and status, whereas only 2.6 percent mentioned “migration” among such dangers and nobody at all looked at AIDS as a serious issue that could eventually act to China’s detriment.

With regard to the regional problems that could endanger the international Chinese role and status, the “Taiwanese issue” leads undoubtedly the list, ticked as it was by 92.1 percent of the interviewees.

The second worrisome factor (44.7%) is represented by the feared “Japanese remilitarization”, closely followed (36.8%) by “controversies with Japan”. The massive reference to Japanese issues as a source of danger for China does not but confirm the description of Japan, previously given by the same sample, as of an “aggressive challenging” neighbor.

The third group of factors perceived by the Chinese as a challenge is more heterogeneous, ranging from the “North Korean crisis” to “religious and ethnic conflicts”, from “pro-democracy and pro-independence upheavals” to “terrorism”. These replies amount just to 13.1 percent of the given answers, whereas 10.5 percent is represented by “territorial disputes” and “human rights issues”.

In the regional framework, the environmental care loses noticeably importance, marked as it was only by 7.8 percent of the interviewees.

Once again, instead, issues related to migration captured nobody’s attention whereas 2.6 percent added the “US presence in Asia” and the “Chinese economic dependence on Russia, Japan and West Asia” as serious threats to the PRC’s global affirmation.

2.3 Chinese desirable foreign policy aims and modus operandi

After the perception of threats follows the perception of goals that Chinese foreign policy makers are expected to pursue.

The vast majority of the interviewees regards “economic growth” as the major goal to be achieved in the national foreign policy. If 76.3 percent of the sample prioritizes economic development, then follows a considerable 42.1 percent of interviewees that underline the importance of “peace”. This list is perfectly consistent with Deng Xiaoping’s motto for the promotion of Chinese development. As he pointed out in a speech in 1984, “Peace

and economic development are the two really great issues confronting the world today” (Deng, 1984:46-47).

These two issues are prioritized to matters such as “social development” (21%) or “international acknowledgment of China’s power” and “social equality” (both amounting to 18.4%)⁷. Far less successful are the remaining items: “human rights promotion” is perceived as a desirable priority foreign policy goal only by 5.2 percent of the sample, the “communist revolution” gains a mere 2.6 percent. As we have already noticed, “war on terrorism” does not mean to the Chinese as much as it does to Westerners: none of the interviewees actually considers it as a goal to aim at in domestic foreign policy!

Some of the interviewees add other issues allegedly standing for significant questions of foreign policy. “Political unification”, “energy and resources” as well as “international acknowledgment of Chinese culture” are perceived totally by 7.8 percent as matters to be seriously dealt with in the current foreign policy agenda.

But how should China negotiate internationally to better pursue these goals? Should it develop an empire-nostalgic strategy of unilateralism, develop only bilateral partnerships or cooperate multilaterally?

The issue is pretty controversial given the regional position of China and its peculiar cultural and historical roots. Still in the Qing era, “China, much more than the emerging

⁷ In the questions regarding goals interviewees could tick up to two answers. Thus figures in percentage refer to the total amount of interviewees and not to the total number of answers provided.

great powers of Europe, had no natural allies and no permanent enemies, but a complex of mutually separable relationships with its neighbors” (Kirby, 1994:17).

In spite of that, 78.9 percent of the interviewees thinks that multilateralism fits the best the present Chinese negotiation needs. This strategy, indeed, involves a larger number of actors and is the soundest IR pattern working in the long run.

Nevertheless 13.1 percent of the sample admits that multilateralism is too long and farraginous a process and does not guarantee problem-solving as quickly and efficiently as bilateralism does. To these people China should first develop a bilateral cooperation pattern in order to safeguard its major interests and then, as a second stage, shift to a multilateral system.

In a sense, the PRC seems to be looking for a middle-way between a wider involvement of foreign actors that be not too binding though. To the Chinese, international cooperation is a priority but it does not have to infringe national sovereignty. This might seem paradoxical and to a certain extent self-contradictory but it does have a sense also in light of the traditional Chinese attitude of pursuing “a multiplicity of independent cooperative relationships, but not alliances” (Kirby, 1994:18).

The question, nowadays, is how this strategy can be still pursued given the increasing globalization and deeper connections among countries. And this issue represents actually one of the most interesting challenges of the present Chinese pattern of development.

Conclusions

The Chinese sample's ideas about current and future foreign policy are very clear.

As a matter of fact, Beijing still has to count on the US as its principal partner. Beijing acknowledges the power and the resources of Washington and has to take them into account whenever planning international manoeuvres. As indicated also by Wang Shimin, in spite of mutual political tensions and skepticism, the Sino-American relations are strong given the increasing commercial and economic links (Wang, 2002:34).

Simultaneously, though, right the American hegemony is considered as the main international challenge threatening the PRC. Not only is the hegemony criticized per se but it is also harshly condemned when it leads to the US interference on the Taiwanese issue. If Washington's hegemony is regarded as a major threat to China at large, its unwished involvement into this delicate local affair is regarded as a considerable obstacle to the settlement of the Taiwanese case itself.

The second major problem envisaged by the interviewees in their regional security is the Japanese case. Tang and Cao had precisely depicted the Chinese disagreement with the alleged attempts of remilitarization and the outcomes of the questionnaire do but confirm this matter of fact (Cao and Tang, 2002:133).

What might look surprising to a Westerner observer is that among all these priorities and challenges, the Chinese hardly mention terrorism. Only 13 percent lists it as an

international threat whereas none expects the “war on terrorism” to be a major foreign policy goal.

An explanation to this apparent oddity is provided by Sun Tianhai. According to this expert of Chinese international politics, September 11 has been interpreted by the Chinese differently from the Americans and in classical geopolitical terms. Along the Chinese standpoint, a precise actor has launched an attack to a determined territory. The criminal and the target are clearly individuated. The war to be fought is then not that much different from any other traditional one. To the Chinese, it is unconceivable to think of a war without territorial limits and temporal deadlines (Sun, 2002:112).

However, the marginal importance attached to this war does not mean that the sample is not sensitive to peace issues. Quite the opposite, instead, given that economic growth and peace are perceived as the principal goals to be pursued by Beijing’s diplomacy. This data confirms Harding’s thesis of the Chinese need for a stable and peaceful environment in order to wholly concentrate on domestic development.

Consistently to this, multilateralism is indicated as the best negotiation strategy. A mainstream in favor of multilateralism has recently surfaced in China. By involving as large the number of actors as possible, Beijing hopes to strengthen regional security and to reduce the clash with Washington. A wide cooperation is more viable and fruitful for the PRC than any direct confrontation with another big power (Cao and Tang, 2002:137)

Thus, again, all the Chinese concerns are rooted on the necessity of creating a stable environment. In this developing stage, the PRC intends to concentrate all its resources

and efforts to carry out its modernization and to empower its political potential. In a sense, peace is not only good per se but is all the more valuable given that it allows to divert energies to other likewise important goals.

As a conclusion, the path is still the one recommended by Jiang Zemin: “Increase trust, reduce trouble, carry out cooperation, avoid confrontation”(Fu, 2003:311).

3. SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

Regardless of their mutual consideration, China and Japan are still the geopolitical pillars of the Asia Pacific Region.

This partnership is though a quite delicate one, marked as it still is with deep-rooted injuries and legacy dating back to World Wars time, the main being the Japanese treatment of China during colonialism and in the middle of World War Second. The PRC claims that Japan has not provided adequate apologies yet. Thus until this problem is not solved the bilateral relationship will keep being tense and extremely vulnerable whenever a change occurs in both countries’ domestic and foreign politics.

In spite of this complaining Chinese attitude towards Japan, the vast majority of the interviewees (65.7%) acknowledges that their homeland needs the “unpleasant” neighbor to pursue its domestic interests. Both Beijing and Tokyo are aware of their mutual “dependence”, given that “Japan needs the Chinese market to keep its economy going as much as China needs the Japanese market to continue its rapid growth” (The Japan Times Online, March 5, 2004).

Albeit there are still several historical issues to be settled, the bilateral partnership is expected to continue, to both countries' benefit. The question then is what kind of path it should embark on and what kind of negotiating strategy both countries should develop to empower their partnership meanwhile reducing their historical tensions. As it was put by the Japanese task force on foreign relations, "The relationship with China is the most important theme in Japan's foreign policy at the outset of the 21st century. For both countries, the relationship is one that interweaves 'cooperation and coexistence' with 'competition and friction'" (the Japanese Task Force on Foreign Relations for the Prime Minister, 2004).

In view of this longed bilateral empowerment, though, the Japanese attempts to reform its military forces do not seem to help. In the past few months significant sectors of the military and policy-making domains refreshed indeed the issue of the "Japanese right" to be provided with a normal defense force, being Japan one of the most advanced countries in the world and feeling particularly weak in times of terrorist threats. The matter does not just touch upon military issues and is more widely a question of national identity. In turn, "Japans' quest for national identity is the key to its quest for a foreign policy option that gives it at least symbolic freedom from the US global strategy" (Rozman, 2003:539).

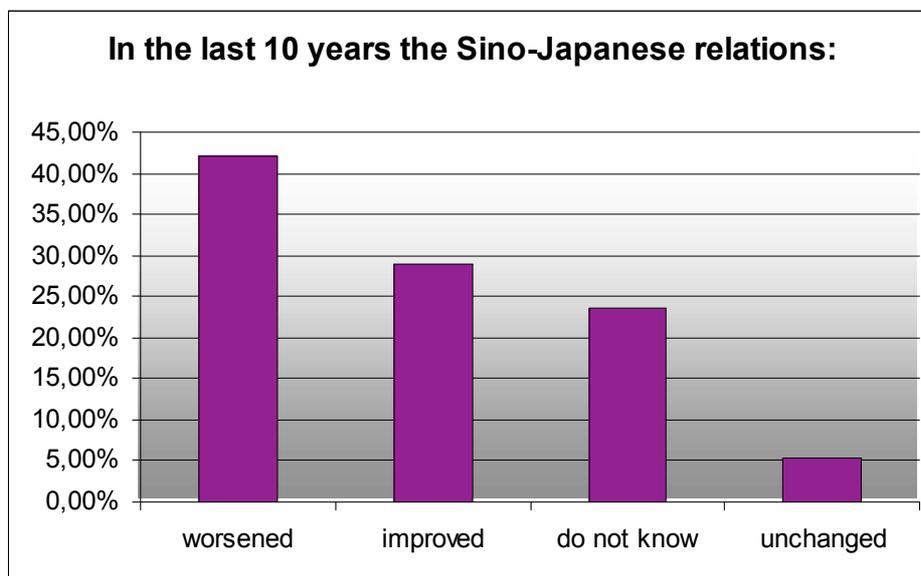
The "military handicap" is legitimated by the Japanese aggressiveness in World War times and is constitutionally established. Hence, a major political and legal reform is necessary to free the country from its military mutilation. Proposals and speeches done with a renewed strength early this year seemed to many observers a first step toward this revolutionary change.

Without any doubt, China is among the countries that fear and discourage the most a possible Japanese remilitarization. China Daily is a perfect spokesman of the Chinese viewpoint on the issue, when it writes that, “As a responsible member of the East Asian community, it is in its own best interest as well as that of the region that Japan continue its pacifist policies” (China Daily Online, February 19, 2004).

To Beijing, the reform proposals recently put forward are unmistakable evidence of the rebirth of Japanese aggressiveness. Indeed, 86.8 percent of the interviewees think of this political change underway in Japan in terms of an attempted remilitarization and only 10.5 percent denies a Japanese intention of restoring an authentic army. Not only they mostly interpret these changes as an involution but they also strongly criticize a possible remilitarization. Three interviewees out of four are convinced that Japan should not restore its army and modify its current defense situation because this would inevitably result in a threat to China.

These changes in the Japanese political agenda have clearly contributed to create a new diplomatic climate. 42 percent of the interviewees argues that in the last ten years the Sino-Japanese relation has worsened whereas only according to 29 percent the bilateral health has improved.

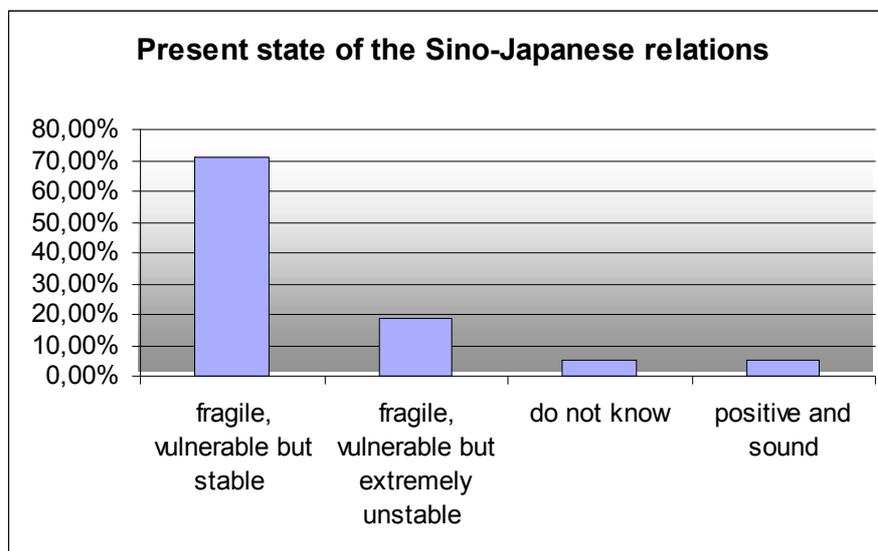
Graph N. 3



The new bilateral climate is mirrored on the perception of the current relationship with Tokyo. Importantly enough, nearly one interviewee out of four admits not to be able to evaluate it and 71 percent of the sample judges the Sino-Japanese partnership as “fragile and vulnerable but still stable”.

If only 5.2 percent considers the Sino-Japanese relationship “positive and sound”, however the occurred changes do not seem to have worrisomely endangered the “necessary friendship”. It is true that 18.4 percent perceives “an extreme instability” as a hallmark of the present bilateral relation but the majority interprets the current situation as a transition from old principles to new ones.

Graph N. 4



Instability, they argue, comes from the lack of sound new rules as it always happens in transitory times. Then the challenge lies on the ability of establishing shortly a complete new framework within which a new Sino-Japanese balance should be developed.

4. CHINA AND NORTHEAST ASIA

4.1 Regional partners

If the United States are perceived as the major Chinese partner in its foreign policy at large, interestingly the same can not be said about regional policy.

To 28.9 percent of the interviewees Russia actually represents the major partner China has in dealing with all the issues concerning the area stretching from the Korean peninsula to the PRC, from Japan to the Asian part of Russia. The cold-war American enemy seems to the Chinese weak and declining right now but its potential in terms of growth and military strength is never underestimated.

The US and South Korea are the other two regional powers that the sample considers significant key-players in the Chinese regional policy. The American superpower is still regarded as the main actor by 26.3 percent and the Korean democracy by 21.0 percent.

Japan seems instead marginalized. Historical tensions and its peculiar military status make him a relevant partner only to 18.4 percent of the interviewees.

4.2 The North Korean crisis

One of the hottest issues on the regional stage is undoubtedly represented by the political tensions in the Korean peninsula and the nuclear threats behind Pyongyang's isolation. Fears of a nuclear war as well as of serious side-effects in case of a North Korean collapse make the international community particularly concerned with and cautious in managing the geopolitical question.

For reasons of geopolitical strategies, domestic interests and international prestige the People's Republic of China has been on the diplomatic forefront in the international attempts to cope with the issue.

The Korean problem lies in two factors: the nuclear threat and the political liaison between the North and the South. All the range of solutions includes the possible combinations of different settlement of both aspects.

The first concern of the entire international community is to be sure not to unleash a nuclear threat that would in turn give rise to a regional and hence global nuclear race. To this regard, the whole sample actually agrees that a peaceful and unnuclear solution to the Korean crisis is the most desirable for the PRC too.

Differences instead arise when it comes to the political settlement of the peninsula. Although the majority (51.3%) wishes a reunification, a significant 10 percent is unsure as to which outcome would fit the best the Chinese needs. On the other side, thinking of problems such as migration, refugees, political instability and economic collapse ensuing of a reunification, 32.4 percent is convinced that the preservation of a separated peninsula would be far more beneficial to China.

4.3 Chinese regional foreign policy

When asked about the most serious regional challenges for China, the interviewees point to the Taiwanese issue nearly unanimously. No wonder then that when it comes to Chinese foreign policy priorities in the region, 78.9 percent of the sample replies that the settlement of the Taiwanese matter is the first goal policy-makers should try to pursue.

To have an idea of how prominent this historical issue is to the Chinese it is enough to think that the second issue the sample is mostly concerned with is chosen just by 31.5

percent of them. In this case it regards economics, namely the “promotion of Asian economic growth” (that had surfaced has the priority aim in the Chinese foreign policy at large).

Political stability and economic prosperity are thus the main expectations of the Chinese for their future. Improvement of the relations both with the US and Japan (and in this case the settlement of the “Japanese remilitarization”, too) are secondary objectives, though still noticeable (they are both chosen by 18.4 percent of the interviewees). What seems to be far less relevant to the people is the development of Asian integration and of environment care (both 7.9%), the promotion of human rights, of poverty alleviation programs and the overall settlement of territorial disputes (each gets to 5.2%).

Interestingly enough, only 2.6 percent of the interviewees considers the Korean issue a hot issue to be put on top of the regional political agenda and, once again, none includes terrorism among such priorities.

4.4 Regional scenarios

According to the Chinese viewpoint, the PRC is going to become the major power in Northeast Asia.

To 60.5 percent of the sample, China is already such a regional key-player, noticeably overtaking both the US and Japan. Although the American presence in the region is still a significant one, it is China that leads local affairs and is going to lead them more and more in the forthcoming years. The “regional superpower” in the future will most likely be China according to as many as 8 interviewees out of 10.

The Japanese decline seems out of question, with fewer and fewer Chinese considering Tokyo as a prominent regional actor not only nowadays but especially in the future (the percentage of those who consider Japan as the major regional power drops from 10.5% to 5.2% when it regards future perspectives).

From the answers provided it seems that Northeast Asia is clearly characterized by the presence of a major regional key-player, be it China or Japan. To the interviewees, such a presence is a guarantee of stability and indeed 68.4 percent perceives a “balance of power” in the region, given that political and military power is mostly concentrated in China whereas the economic primacy still belongs to Japan.

Hence, the region seems stable to six interviewees out of ten but peace is not assured by stability alone. Indeed, only one out of these six interviewees argues that currently the region is enjoying both stability and peace whereas to half of the sample the situation is not peaceful at all. If nobody finds the current geopolitical status “extremely insecure”, 21 percent describes it as “tense and unstable”.

The overall picture is then one of precariousness that matches with the previous idea of a transition underway in the area.

What would then help assure long-term stability and peace? The European integration process has sounded as a model Northeast Asia could follow too and indeed 55 percent of the sample agrees with the opportunity of “translating” the European recipe in Asian terms. Nevertheless it remains a still significant group (31.5%) that disagrees with that. The explanation they provide is that the European model can be viable to Northeast Asia

only in the very long-run because regional backgrounds are deeply different and Asia still lacks some basic requirements. In spite of that, they also admit that a similar integration process would be necessary and desirable.

The main outcome is the acknowledgment that a wider international cooperation is needed in view of regional stability, peace and prosperity. The condemnation of hegemony has surfaced clearly and a neat preference (68.4%) has been given to “broader international cooperation” as the key to a strengthened regional balance of power. Bilateralism still means a lot to the Chinese (15.7%), especially when it involves such actors as the US and Japan but “regional cooperation” is gaining increasing success and favor (5.2%).

What seems feasible and desirable in the short run is actually an empowerment of local regional cooperation and integration processes and hence a strengthening of multilateralism. This would convey a sounder negotiating potential to Northeast Asia as a region and would make it a major world player without jeopardizing both local and global interests.

Conclusions

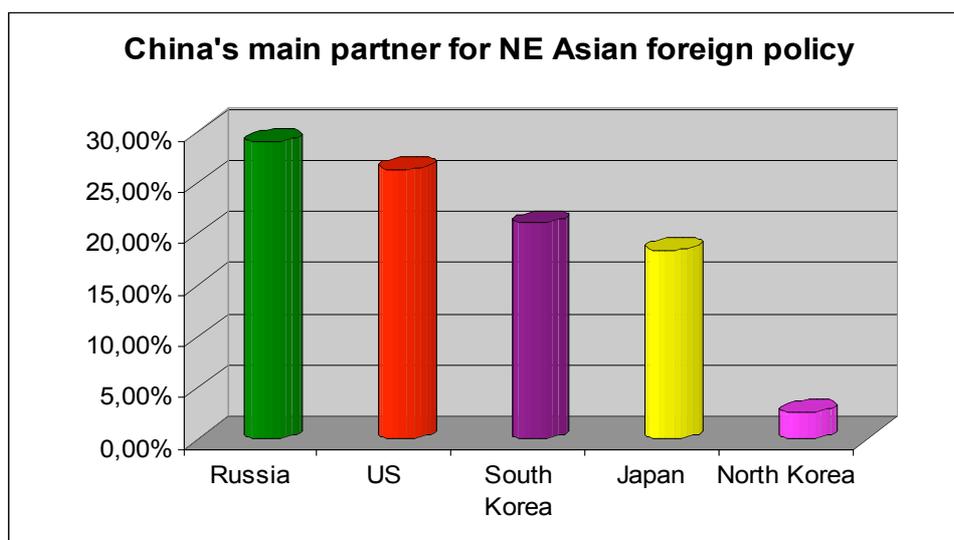
The picture ensuing of this chapter is very clear and coherent again.

The first uncontroversial outcome is that the sample is convinced that the PRC is the principal geopolitical actor in Northeast Asia. As Hu Jintao said, “China is the driving force for Asian development” and will strengthen this role in the years to come (Fu, 2003:309). A significant implication of this is that the empowerment of Beijing’s

geopolitical role in the region is being paralleled by the fading leverage of Tokyo and Washington.

Second, if the USA are China's main partner in its foreign policy at large, as surfaced in chapter two, the same can not be said about China's regional politics. In this context, indeed, Russia is rehabilitated, consistently with the description provided in the first chapter. As the following graphs illustrate, the alliances the PRC can count on at regional level are broader and more diversified than those characterizing global politics.

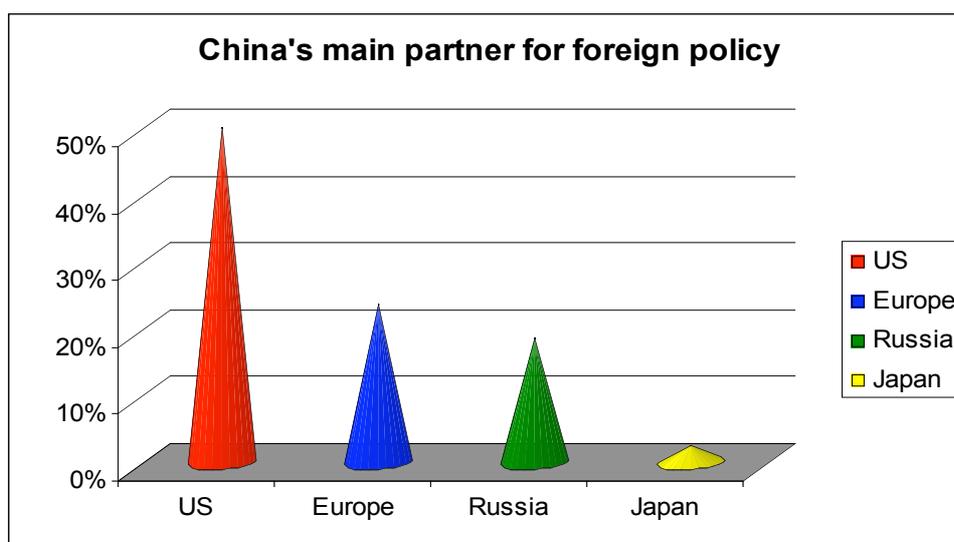
Graph N. 5



In Northeast Asia, indeed, there is more of a “balance of power”, with several significant actors contributing to shape international relations. In the global arena, on the contrary,

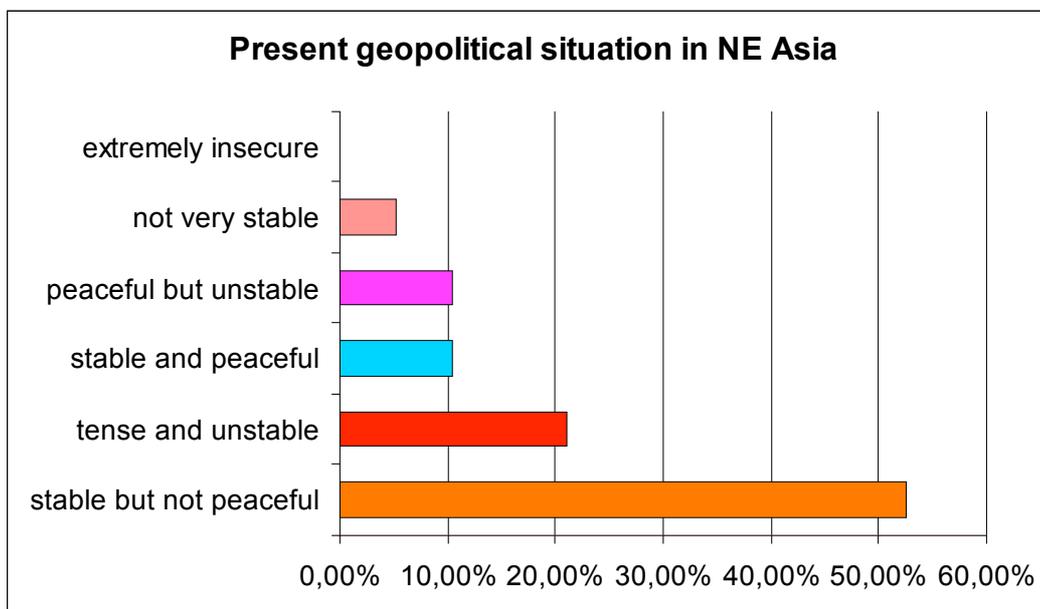
the image is much more definite: the US lead unthreatened the game, followed by far by Europe and Russia, whereas Japan hardly partake.

Graph N. 6



Consistently with these first results, the vast majority of the sample admits that the geopolitical situation in the region is balanced, with no hegemonic attitudes and trends. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily result in a peaceful and stable climate. The detailed picture provided by the following graph illustrates indeed that to half of the sample the situation seems not peaceful and to 20 percent of it even “tense and unstable”.

Graph N. 7



The overall image, then, is that of a geopolitical area undergoing a process of transition, which implies by definition a phase of precariousness. Although the Korean issue represents a hot issue on the Chinese agenda only to roughly three percent of the interviewees, the region has diverse reasons for feeling insecure and unstable. This is a matter of great concern for Beijing's agenda; after all, "As a large country, China has a responsibility to safeguard regional security and stability" (Fu, 2003:310).

A wider cooperation pattern, possibly getting close to that achieved by the European Union, is envisaged as a desirable path to embark on in order to enhance stability and peace.

CONCLUSION

1. The pillars

From the answers provided we can argue that Levine's pillars are still largely valid.

Undoubtedly the Chinese still regard themselves as a great people and a great nation, deserving a better fate than the one they currently have, even though at present they enjoy a satisfactory international acknowledgement. Economic growth is the main avenue to a better global affirmation and to that aim peace is to be continuously safeguarded. Political stability, both domestically and abroad, together with a high rate of growth keep being perceived as priority requirements.

China is already regarded as the main regional power but will undoubtedly play a leading role in the years to come. According to the interviewees, by developing a sound multilateral system and by enhancing its economic relations the PRC will be an efficient regional leader with no hegemonic attitudes, as confirmed early this year by the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. He repeatedly declared indeed that "China does not seek hegemony now, nor will it seek hegemony even after it became powerful in the future" (People's Daily, March 14, 2004). This regional picture further stresses the underlying recognition of the greatness of the Chinese nation and people.

The Taiwanese issue and some minor conflicts remind us of the Chinese sacred value of national sovereignty. The "rebel province" is predominantly considered as a threat and a

challenge. As such, it is on top of the Chinese political agenda and has to be managed by the PRC alone, with no American interference.

2. A status-quo maintainer?

At the light of these outcomes, it is confirmed that Beijing is increasingly intervening into world affairs but meanwhile it is determined to play a more incisive role than that of a mere status-quo maintainer.

It surfaces clearly that China intends to slow down and restrict the Japanese ambitions, the American interference and hegemony and to manage delicately the Korean crisis. The priority is of course that of making the surrounding environment as stable as necessary for domestic development at large. The reason behind that is that as long as all local conflicts, first the Taiwanese one, are not settled, Beijing cannot devote all its resources and energies to the modernization it aims at.

Thus if it is confirmed that the Chinese international role is increasing and strengthening, it is though not just restricted to the preservation of the current state of world affairs. As Gerald Segal phrased it, “China matters militarily to a certain extent simply because it is not a status quo power” (Segal, 2004:15).

The more the Chinese power grows, the more demands it nurtures and the more expectations it entitles the nation to. The escalate to the “deserved fate” implies clear political goals and likewise neat economic projects in order to wholly unfold the country’s potential.

3. A coherent foreign policy

Chinese culture might be incoherent but its foreign policy has uncontroversial hallmarks, ensuing of generally shared interviewees' viewpoints and logically connected to the increasing Chinese involvement in global affairs.

First, the Chinese feel overwhelmed by the American presence and attitude both in world affairs and particularly in Northeast Asia. Although half of the sample acknowledges that the US is still China's main geopolitical partner, a strong condemnation of the American hegemony recurrently surfaces. The post-cold war superpower is recognized as a superior power but this does not allow for its *predominant, aggressive* and *arrogant* attitude in dealing with world politics. The US is all the more criticized for its excessive interference in the Taiwanese issue which does not but make the problem settlement more complicated and uneasy.

Second, Japan keeps being looked at as an unpleasant neighbor, nowadays becoming further threatening. Tokyo's attempts to change its military status, in addition to its "historical guilt", worsen the image China has of its geopolitical counterpart. The US' ally is still considered extremely aggressive and increasingly ambitious. Still detaining a significant economic power, Japan is though politically declining in the international arena but is supposedly trying to reverse such a trend. Remilitarization and claims to have a seat in the UN Council are some of the most blatant steps in that direction, which China does not approve at all.

Third, unlike what happens among West public opinions, China does not feel threatened by terrorism or at least does not regard terrorism as one of the most serious challenges upon its present security. “War on terrorism” is considered by none of the interviewees as a goal of Beijing’s foreign policy which is rather dominated by two other priorities.

Political stability and economic growth are undoubtedly the issues that the Chinese people care the most about. Domestic economic growth is the most desirable goal that the PRC should try to pursue and the promotion of Asian economy is the second most expected regional foreign policy objective. After all, China is quite happy of its political emancipation but still feels unsatisfied with its economic development. In spite of the recent economic records achieved, it still remains a developing country, endowed though with an immense potential. Empowering the country’s economy is then generally perceived as a necessary step on the way to the complete unfolding of the “Chinese grandeur”.

The settlement of the Taiwanese issue is the priority on the regional foreign policy agenda and the foremost regional challenge hanging over China. It represents actually more than a matter of national pride and of historical concern as it has deep implications on long-term peace, security and stability.

Peace and stability still have to take sound roots in Northeast Asia. Although 68 percent of the interviewees perceive a balance of power in the region, half of the sample does not depict the regional status as peaceful and one out of five interviewees even describe it as *tense and unstable*. Regional precariousness seems to be the predominant feeling, largely due to the transition phase that most of the local countries are going through.

Hegemony is largely recognized as a detrimental geopolitical pattern and what is warmly desired is the development of a broader framework of regional and international cooperation. If traditionally Asia used to adopt a bilateral approach to foreign affairs, nowadays multilateralism is increasingly preferred. A larger involvement of actors and a broader adoption of international rules is the key to stronger integration.

To this regard and in spite of clear differences, the European experience is often considered as a good model to look at. Although still weak in several circumstances, both the Bruxelles experiment and the UN mission win the Chinese approval. The mediation and negotiation skills of these institutions are continuously praised by the sample. Nonetheless, it underlines simultaneously how feeble they both still are towards the American dominant and imperialistic attitude in the global arena.

These four elements constitute the fil-rouge of Chinese foreign policy for the years to come. They are logically connected to each other and they all rest on the following cardinal points.

First, the interviewees soundly agree with the perception that China is already the major regional power and is going to strengthen such a role in the forthcoming years.

Second, Russia is estimated as a very valuable partner for both local and global affairs. Moscow is described mostly as a currently feeble world actor whose potential though is nonetheless still significant, as much as nearly one interviewee out of three regards Russia as the main regional partner of the PRC.

Third, the Chinese feels to be perceived in markedly positive terms by the international community at large, which can sound pretty different from general opinion in the West. Indeed, few interviewees feel to be considered as a “threat” or a “danger” by the rest of the world and when that happens, it is mostly related to the Asian neighbors’ perception. I argue that a sound positive perception of the own national image and role in the world can not but constitute a healthy starting point for an escalade in the international arena.

Fourth, the major regional Chinese “alliance”, i.e. that with Japan, is generally depicted as *fragile, vulnerable but stable*. The more Tokyo tries to insert changes to its status in domestic and world politics, the more Beijing seems ready to show its rooted disagreement and its superior international leverage.

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