Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging

ROSEMARY FOOT*

The rise of China, especially marked in the 1990s, has prompted a realist argument that the unipolar order is leading to the establishment of a Chinese-led anti-hegemonic coalition, and to China’s building up its internal economic and military capabilities in order to become a ‘peer competitor’ of the United States.1 Other analysts state that, while China (like some other states) generates ‘a paper trail’ indicating strong dislike of a US-dominated global order, its actual behaviour amounts to bandwagoning.2

The simplicity of these views makes them attractive; but in fact neither captures the complexity of Chinese perspectives or the sense of vulnerability that underlies Chinese behaviour. Over the last ten to fifteen years, China’s political and scholarly elites have articulated quite a wide range of views about how the current global order should be characterized and how the country’s government should respond to that order. One of the major consequences of China’s economic reform programme and its embrace of market liberalism has been a diversification of perspectives among influential scholars, commentators

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and officials. Over time, too, perspectives have changed in response to events. The more unwelcome events—from the PRC’s viewpoint—include the US granting of a visa in 1995 to the President of Taiwan and America’s show of force in the Taiwan Strait area in 1996; the revision by the US and Japan of their defence guidelines agreement in 1996–7; the Asian financial crisis of 1997–9; NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the bombing that May of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade; the beginning of the anti-terrorist campaign, which brought with it a stronger US presence in Central Asia; and US military intervention in Iraq in March 2003. Perceptions also change as a result of the shifting balance of influence among powerful elite groups, and would alter more if serious domestic disruption were to occur that brought fundamentally into question the wisdom of the development path that China has chosen to take since 1979.

All these factors favour a more interpretive approach to the matter of Chinese perspectives on global order: an approach that suggests nothing is pre-ordained, that policy choices are being made, and that not everything is determined by systemic structure. In this article, I shall try to give some indication of the range of perspectives now current in China, while also outlining the dominant officially articulated positions at key moments in the post–Cold War era.

Four main questions will be addressed:

- How do Chinese elites characterize the current global order?
- How does that characterization affect Chinese perspectives on the country’s relations with the United States?
- What have been China’s policy responses to that global order? In particular, is China involved—as realists would suggest—in either internal or external balancing against, or bandwagoning with, the US hegemon?
- What would China see as an alternative, fairer, global order?

The People’s Republic of China and global order

The Cold War era

During the Cold War, the conceptual framework that Beijing’s leaders brought to bear on the analysis of international affairs involved a focus on the rise and fall of hegemonic powers, powers that were willing to use their resources to achieve global domination and to constrain the actions of others.3 This framework encouraged the Chinese to see their own security concerns as arising from the

global strategy of the hegemonic state of the moment—namely (in the view of Beijing), the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s (and again now), and from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s the Soviet Union.

An important aspect of the Chinese concept of hegemony is that it includes a willingness on the part of the hegemon to use its resources to establish control over others. In its negative form, the Chinese understanding of this concept dates back at least to the ‘Warring States’ period (about 480–221 BCE), and received a powerful boost during the so-called ‘century of humiliation’ (1842–1949) during which strong powers interfered in China’s internal affairs and substituted the unequal treaty system for the former tributary arrangements. It further shaped Chinese thinking after 1949, when the US in particular could be blamed for preventing the PRC’s territorial unification with Taiwan, creating threatening military alliances with some of China’s neighbours, obstructing Beijing’s establishment of diplomatic relations with a number of states, imposing a strict trading embargo upon the country, and organizing a coalition that sought to deny it the China seat in the United Nations until 1971.

In dealing with America’s strong containment policy in the period until the Sino-American rapprochement of 1972, Beijing drew on ‘hard power’ as well as ‘soft power’ resources. In the 1950s it formed an alliance with Moscow and used that link to build up its economic and military capabilities, in the belief, as Mao put it, that western nations would not take China seriously until it could produce the goods of an industrialized economy and had advanced weaponry (including nuclear arms) at its disposal. Chinese leaders at this time also emphasized the ideological appeal of the new China, compared with the allegedly demoralized, unpopular West, to newly decolonized states. Especially as Sino-Soviet rivalry emerged in the late 1950s, Beijing projected itself to developing countries as the most appropriate economic and political model for them, and as one of the main agents of revolutionary change that would propel the wheel of world history. When relations with the USSR deteriorated to the point where violence resulted and a major war between the two erstwhile socialist allies was deemed probable, Beijing justified the establishment of a tacit anti-Soviet alignment with Washington on the basis that US imperialism was on the retreat and Moscow had usurped Washington’s previous leading hegemonic role.

The post-Cold War era

These earlier perspectives illustrate various salient aspects of China’s outlook on international affairs in those years: a concentration on trends in world politics, a concern to be taken seriously as a peer by dominant states, and a felt need to express a leadership role towards the developing world. They also show a relatively wide-ranging conception of power going beyond (though by no means disregarding) material capabilities. Certain of these emphases still resonate today as China’s leadership—and, increasingly, its citizenry—debate the current global order. The United States and its power capabilities are still of
intense interest to many Chinese. The US hegemon is seen as critical to China’s pursuit of its core national objectives, including reunification with Taiwan and establishment of a reasonably affluent society amid continuing domestic stability (important not only on its own account but because this is the basis for legitimating the maintenance of one-party rule). The US, after all, has been taking between 30 and 40 per cent of China’s exports and has been a major source of foreign direct investment. Without US support, the rulers of Taiwan would have long since been forced to give up their independent existence. China’s search for what it has described as ‘comprehensive national strength’ is also bound up with its strong desire for recognition as a great power; yet it still claims links, and to a degree identifies itself, with the developing world. Its focus—especially sharp in the early 1990s—on what it discerned as a trend towards multipolarity in the global system displays a continuing preoccupation not solely with the current distribution of material power among states, but also with the longer-term outlook.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to overplay these continuities. Recently, Chinese officials and scholars have investigated and embraced newer concepts such as globalization, multilateralism and cooperative security, connecting them to standpoints more familiar in Beijing. These connections seem to have been made only in the past three or four years, as will be discussed below, influenced strongly by developments since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the beginning of war in Iraq in 2003. Before that there were two main debates, with some overlap, about the post-Cold War global order. The first, in the early 1990s, emphasized a traditional understanding of multipolarity (i.e. a more equal distribution of power among states) twinned with a perception that the US, despite its sole superpower status, had underlying weaknesses. The second, later in the decade, while still seeing multipolarity as a desirable goal, accepted unipolarity as a long-term phenomenon, but added more sophisticated understandings of power and about how to achieve security in a globalized age.

The global order debate

To start with the first phase: it was not until 1991–2—the timing is often attributed to the demise of the Soviet Union—that Chinese leaders became willing to hazard a somewhat clearer description of the post-Cold War world order. As the foreign minister at the time, Qian Qichen, put it in his 1991 year-

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5 When Chinese leaders and intellectuals start to discuss the concept of ‘soft power’, and when the official newspaper, the People’s Daily, publishes a review of Joseph Nye’s The paradox of American power, then we should not be surprised at the widening of the terms of the debate about these matters. See ‘The paradox of American power: commentary’, in People’s Daily, 15 Mar. 2003, available at http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/, accessed 27 Jan. 2005.
end assessment: ‘Although the world is in the transitional period and a new pattern has not yet taken shape, there is a rough structure in international relations, in which one superpower and several powers depend on and struggle against each other.’ He went on: ‘This is the initial stage of the evolution towards multipolarization,’ a statement implicitly recognizing that, at that moment, China actually operated in a unipolar world, even if it was unwilling to acknowledge this directly. Chinese scholars speculated on the form this multipolarity might take, most suggesting a five-polar structure consisting of the US, a united Germany (sometimes EU), China, Japan and Russia. Most, again, believed that the current unipolar world order would not last long, taking heart from various signs of US weakness, especially in the economic domain. Even the impressive US military display during the 1990–91 war against Iraq could be used to illustrate the point, given that America required other countries to pay the costs involved.6

From about the middle of the 1990s, however, a certain unease set in as the United States evidenced not only staying power as a superpower but also what China viewed as instances of hegemonic behaviour. NATO’s eastward expansion and the renegotiation of the guidelines for the US–Japan alliance were interpreted by some as methods of encircling Russia and China; and the US decision to embark on establishing missile defence systems as well as assuming leadership of the war in Kosovo was seen as evidence of a grand strategy of world domination.7 According to one military analyst, Europe and Japan had disappointed: neither had done anything to challenge US unipolar dominance, apparently prompting Chinese leaders to conclude that China’s calls for multipolarity were increasingly ‘out of touch with reality’, 8 and that unipolarity was here to stay for the foreseeable future. This perspective seems to have stuck. One particularly pessimistic report, published in the PRC-owned newspaper Ta Kung Pao (Hong Kong), argued in 2002 that ‘the whole world will pass the first half of the 21st century under the supervision and control of the United States’, because the US had achieved a ‘comprehensive national strength’ superior to any other state, and because its ‘psychological state’ had ‘reached the point that it can do whatever it wants in the world and can try to seek an enemy with which to carry out a trial of strength at any time’.9

Even as Chinese scholars began to develop a more sophisticated understanding of power that incorporated consideration of its less overtly coercive aspects, this afforded little or no comfort. As Shen Jiru put it in 1999, while today’s hegemon might not occupy territory, it did have other means of

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gaining influence. It ‘often uses ideology (democracy, human rights and other value concepts) as weapons, spreads ideology, and even uses ideology as an excuse to launch a local war, in order to interfere in a country’s internal affairs, and to bring this country into its own system’. Yan Xuetong seemed to agree, arguing in 2000 that the US had legitimized its hegemony by creating international norms that had commanded the assent of most other countries.10

Chinese understandings of globalization did not help matters much either, at first. Although globalization was recognized as an important transformative force for China, it could clearly also create new sources of vulnerability—as shown by the 1997–9 Asian financial crisis and the spread of epidemics such as SARS. Moreover, by the late 1990s, as scholars and political elites came to define globalization in terms that reached beyond the economic realm, they realized that some of the additional dimensions of the phenomenon were of particular benefit to the United States. With America’s ‘advantage in technological innovation, revolution in military affairs, and cultural domination, globalization seemed to confer relative gains’ on Washington, and thus further to reinforce the unipolar structure.11

Yet alongside these lines of argument a new strand was also developed, suggesting that this same force—globalization—could actually act as a restraint on US power. Drawing on ideas associated with liberal interdependence theorists, some Chinese analysts recognized that globalization could change conceptions of interest in such a way as to afford stronger reasons for international cooperation, and could even prevent the use of force in regions (such as north-east Asia) that were strongly interdependent economically. Globalization, Zheng Yu argued in 2003, means that ‘there are no absolute winners or absolute losers’ and implies that we do not live in a ‘zero-sum’ world. Such a realization, if successfully promoted, he suggested, could underpin cooperation even among the great powers.12 These ideas were reflected in official speeches, with Chinese leaders making frequent reference to the ‘win–win’ effect of mutually beneficial international cooperation.13

Beijing’s political elites were not willing to jettison the idea of a multipolar order entirely, however, and instead began to describe globalization and multipolarity in ways that suggested the two processes were proceeding in parallel and were interconnected, even if ‘amid twists and turns’.14 In an important adjustment to the way multipolarity had typically been described in the past, officials

11 Yong Deng and Thomas G. Moore, ‘China views globalization: toward a new great-power politics?’ Washington Quarterly 27:3, Summer 2004, p. 120.
and some scholars projected it as an ideal related to a desire to democratize world politics. They suggested, too, that multipolarity should not be thought of as the Chinese way of directly balancing the US hegemon, but instead as intimately connected with economic interdependence, multilateralism and cooperative security (ideas to which we shall return in the final section of this article).

**Sino-US relations in a US-dominated global order**

The Chinese accept, then, that they are functioning in a world dominated by a United States that in a globalized era is especially privileged. Moreover, they believe that US dominance is likely to prevail for many decades to come. Yet, although Chinese recognize that their country is far behind the United States across all dimensions of power, they also see their own country on the rise—and, unlike the former Soviet Union, being steadily integrated into the world economy and able to benefit from economic globalization. Moreover, while China has been increasing its military spending over the past several years, it is not—again unlike the former USSR—about to exhaust itself in an unproductive arms race with the United States.

How, then, within this framework of power-related ideas, does China see the present and future of US–China relations? According to the influential scholar Shi Yinhong, those debating this matter in China can be divided into three main groups. The first group—which he describes as the majority of the elite—‘hope for long-term accommodation with the United States, but seriously doubt its probability’, ruling out neither major conflict nor a Cold War-type confrontation. A second group—a minority, but very influential—are more optimistic about the prospects for cooperation over the long term, although they accept that Sino-US accommodation would be subject to a process of ‘agonized mutual adaptation’. And a third group—a small minority with little influence on officials, according to Shi Yinhong—predict conflict because the US will ‘never tolerate a China as a world power or even No. 2 great power in Asia and the Pacific’.15 Wang Jisi, also an influential voice, has assessed Chinese perspectives in a fairly similar but more polarized way, stating that some believe US administrations will attempt to constrain China’s rise, prevent it from emerging as a strategic competitor, and make use of its energy dependency to cut it off from supplies vital to its economic development, while others are more optimistic and point to China’s ability to benefit from the promotion of economic and security cooperation in Asia and from cooperative partnerships with other great powers, including the United States.16


16 Wang, ‘China’s changing role in Asia’, pp. 4–5.
What ties these divergent views together is an acknowledgement that China has to accept the fact of unipolarity. Many strongly resent this feature of the current global order, but even the most resentful see the need to find a way of living with it. The writer in *Ta Kung Pao* in 2002 quoted above suggested that, while Beijing had to promote its interests in a world where Washington could do whatever it wanted, in the meantime China had to find a way to ‘avoid open conflicts with the United States and not give it an excuse to shift its attention to our country to pick quarrels that would result in extraordinary interference in China’s endeavour to modernize’. Although this reads like a ‘ducking strategy’, in fact ‘making the best of it’ has meant more than that, and has involved projecting a more sophisticated view of the world, and a more nuanced set of foreign policies, than was prevalent either in the Cold War era or in the period immediately after the Tiananmen Square bloodshed of 1989.

**China’s strategies**

Ever since the start of the reform period that began in 1979 the Chinese leadership has described its key goal, the bedrock of its strategy, as being to achieve comprehensive national strength (now most frequently referred to as an ‘all-round affluent society’) by focusing on its process of development. The legitimacy of the one-party system in China depends fundamentally on the success of this strategy. The leadership has also constantly argued that, in order to be able to concentrate on this goal, it requires a peaceful regional and global environment. In 1989 the architect of the reform, Deng Xiaoping, outlined his key principles for handling foreign policy: ‘Observe developments soberly, maintain our position, meet challenges calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, remain free of ambition, never claim leadership.’ Later—as elaborated in 1993 by President Jiang Zemin, and with particular reference to China’s need to stabilize relations with the United States—the mantra became: ‘enhancing confidence, reducing troubles, expanding cooperation, and avoiding confrontation’.

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17 For one surprisingly strident comment, see remarks by Qian Qichen—a former Chinese foreign minister, still influential in the foreign affairs field—writing in the *China Daily*, 1 Nov. 2004. Qian described the ‘Bush doctrine’ as one based on force: ‘It advocates the United States should rule over the whole world with overwhelming force, military force in particular.’ Describing the US as cocksure and arrogant, Qian also predicted that Washington’s approach was doomed to failure, because world politics had changed and its attempts to realize its key imperial goals would be frustrated by soft power and multilateralism. (Chinese authorities swiftly removed this controversial op-ed statement from the *China Daily* official site.) A public opinion poll taken in March 2005, which surveyed 1,175 families in five major Chinese cities, produced the outcome that ‘71% of the respondents had a positive view of Americans. But 57% also said they believed that America was trying to limit China’s advancement.’ The 71% figure is perhaps not as surprising as it seems at first glance, given that urban areas have benefited disproportionately from China’s opening up. See Mark Magnier, ‘Chinese urbanites are of two minds on US, poll finds’, 4 Mar. 2005, http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/, accessed 16 March 2005.


19 For an important statement that explains this focus, see Zheng Bijian, ‘China’s “peaceful rise” to great-power status’, *Foreign Affairs* 84: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2005. Zheng states that ‘for the next few decades, the Chinese nation will be preoccupied with securing a more comfortable and decent life for its people’ (p. 19).

However, from about 1996 this rather passive and unspecific approach was replaced with something more active and with real policy content. At first, this shift in direction was prompted by the Chinese leadership’s realization that China’s own rise, and its assertive regional policies of the early to mid-1990s with respect to Taiwan and the South China Sea, had alarmed its neighbours, putting in jeopardy one of its key goals, establishing regional calm. Its behaviour had given substance to the ‘China threat’ argument and thus raised the prospect that containment of a rising China would become a more prominent part of both US and Asian strategy.

Deng’s references to never claiming leadership, hiding capacity and biding time were not helpful to these new formulations and were quietly dropped. In their place, Chinese leaders developed rhetoric and policies designed to show other countries that China’s rise would be benign and mutually beneficial. As its foreign minister explained in August 2002, ‘the development of China is not a challenge, nor a threat, it is a new opportunity for development’. Various means were adopted to demonstrate that China’s increased economic and political clout would not be a menace to others. From 1996 Beijing started to give prominence to what it called a ‘new security concept’, which articulated the need to develop ‘mutual trust and ties of common interest’ to promote genuine security. It also called for the replacement of the ‘outmoded’ mentality of power politics and old-style bilateral military alliances that had been lingering on even after the ending of the Cold War. During the Asian financial crisis of 1997–9, Beijing moved swiftly to offer economic assistance to countries affected and announced that it would not be devaluing its own currency as a response to the crisis. China started to engage far more actively with Asian multilateral security and economic organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and APEC. In addition, it put its weight behind the creation of a new Asia-only economic grouping, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) arrangement, which drew in China, South Korea and Japan.

The ASEAN states were wooed with particular fervour. In November 2002 China signed two documents: a framework trade arrangement designed to establish by 2010 an ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement; and, also with ASEAN, a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, renouncing violent means of dealing with disputed sovereignty claims in these waters. In October 2003 it became the first major Asian state outside ASEAN to sign up to the association’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the provisions of


22 Speech by Tang Jiaxuan, on Chinese Foreign Ministry website, and available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/, accessed 16 May 2003. In fact, the phrase ‘peaceful rise’ came to be replaced in China with ‘peaceful development’, Tang’s speech being one of the early signals of this move.

which likewise rule out the use of force for settling issues in dispute. North-east and Central Asia also received attention. China started to play a leading role in dealing with the nuclear weapons crisis on the Korean peninsula, in recognition that the proliferation and instabilities that would follow either North Korea’s collapse or a US attack on the North would be very costly and seriously destabilizing to the region, undermine Beijing’s determination to focus on domestic development, and damage its economic gains. It took a more active stance in the six-member Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the six being China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, establishing a secretariat in Beijing, holding joint anti-terrorist exercises with some of its members, and discussing expansion of its remit into economic areas. It also pointed to the April 1996 Five Power Treaty on Confidence Building Measures among the Shanghai Five (the precursor to the SCO, absent Uzbekistan) as an exemplar of mutual security and as evidence that China had proved itself willing to agree to certain intrusive measures in order to contribute positively to the promotion of common security.

Chinese leaders’ efforts in the Asian region were complemented by more active participation in global fora. 24 President Jiang and Premier Zhu Rongji decided in 1999—against considerable domestic opposition—to embark on the final stage of negotiations with the US over China’s membership of the WTO. China also stepped up its contribution to UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, gradually extending the size and nature of its units and geographical area of engagement. In 2004 Beijing joined the Nuclear Suppliers Group and applied for membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime. All of this was meant to underline that China was not just a ‘peaceful, developing’ power, but was also emerging as a ‘responsible great power’ in world politics. Thus, while there were to be many continuities with the Deng era, Jiang and his successor Hu Jintao have moved on to emphasize the importance of economic globalization, the multidimensional nature of security, and the need to recognize the responsibility of the great powers, including China, for maintaining global order. 25

Bilateral ties were to be improved as well. 26 China sought to establish cooperative strategic partnerships or to sign ‘cooperation agreements’ with many of its neighbours, including Russia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Thailand and Malaysia. Beyond its own region, too, countries such as Brazil, France, Germany, Iran, Sudan and Venezuela—important not least because they provided access to key economic resources—were given greater attention than hitherto. Only

26 See Goldstein, Rising to the challenge, esp. chs 6 and 7.
with Japan did this strategy fall well short of its objectives, despite strong economic ties. Peter Hays Gries has rightly described the acrimony between the two countries as a ‘real check on the development of an Asian regionalism that could buffer U.S. power’. \(^{27}\) Mutual Sino-Japanese wariness has increased since the last half of the 1990s, a cooling connected on the Chinese side with the reinvigoration of the US–Japan security alliance (but not with the maintenance of the alliance per se), Japan’s participation with the US in the early stages of missile defence arrangements, the more assertive Japanese strategic posture, especially since the US-led war in Afghanistan in autumn 2001, and the persistence of Prime Minister Koizumi in visiting the controversial Yasukuni shrine that honours Japan’s war dead.

How does China’s America policy fit into this more activist framework? It has been an essential part of it, starting with the attempts during Jiang’s summit in Washington in October 1997 to establish a ‘constructive strategic partnership’ similar to that sought with other states, and then taking more realistic shape, as a result of a significant rise in tensions between 1999 and 2001, in a search for a reasonable working relationship based on ‘constructive and candid’ discussion. After the terrorist assaults on US territory in September 2001, China seized the opportunity to build a common counter-terrorism stance, surprisingly allowing the establishment of an FBI legal attaché’s office in Beijing, and imposing more serious curbs on the transference of WMD components. Overall, Beijing’s aim has been to accommodate where possible and to seek coincidences of interest with Washington.\(^{28}\) Even when war was launched in 2003 against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, a policy with which China fundamentally disagreed, Chinese leaders indicated they would criticize but acquiesce, generally leaving it to France and Germany to play a more forward role in opposing US policy. At the WTO meeting in Cancún in 2003, while China did become a part of the G20—which was important to the moral and material weight of this coalition—it did not take part in drafting the group’s first text,\(^{29}\) and was generally perceived as being ‘much less strident in its criticism than were Brazil, India, and many other developing countries’. Apparently, though US trade officials were dismayed that China had joined the G20, ‘they praised Beijing afterward for working hard to broker a deal’. Later, the director-general of the WTO, Supachai Panitchpakdi, called on China to use its ‘influence to bridge the gap between developing and developed nations’,\(^ {30}\) suggesting, perhaps, that he thought China had successfully straddled the two camps. Beijing has consistently taken a firm stand against the US only over the

\(^{27}\) Gries, ‘China eyes the hegemon’, p. 10.

\(^{28}\) One of the clearest statements of the reasons why this is so is contained in Wang Jisi, ‘China’s search for stability with America’, Foreign Affairs 84: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2005.


Taiwan question, US criticism of its human rights record—now more prominently involving the matter of religious freedom in China—and US attempts to undermine the authority of the UN Security Council.Overall, this strategy could be interpreted as ‘soft bandwagoning’ with the United States. But it is counterbalanced by a stronger Chinese global and regional presence, expressed through multilateral fora, global regimes and formalized bilateral ties, in which Chinese officials retain the option to promote their own interests even where these might cut across those promoted by Washington. In this sense, while Beijing’s strategy can be viewed as accommodation with the current US-dominated global order, it also contains an important ‘hedging’ element, or insurance policy, through which China seeks to secure its future.32 If it should become necessary, that is, China could try to use its newly formed bilateral and multilateral relationships to offset any serious deterioration in relations with America.33 The strong ties it has sought to establish around the world help to ensure that Cold War-style containment of China simply could not occur in this era of interdependence. Such ties also help to ensure secure access to the resources that are vital to its position as ‘workshop of the world’, a role that underpins its intertwined domestic political and development goals.34 Yet, if it cannot entirely be described as bandwagoning, neither is China’s strategy the same as ‘soft balancing’ through the formation of anti-hegemonic

31 For example, with respect to US criticism of China’s human rights record, Beijing regularly produces its own annual report critical of the US record, and at the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) has constantly used ‘no-action’ motions to thwart further progress with US-sponsored draft resolutions critical of China’s human rights practices. More generally, China has also been able to influence substantially the work of the UNCHR and its Sub-Commission. It has taken a lead within the ‘Like-Minded Group’ (LMG) in proposing that the Commission no longer make country-specific resolutions. See ‘Shame! Killing the CHR’, Asian Centre for Human Rights, New Delhi, www.achrweb.org, 16 Feb. 2005, accessed 20 Feb. 2005.

32 Evelyn Goh defines hedging, with reference to South-East Asian policies, as ‘a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality’. Clearly, my own usage reflects this idea, although I would emphasize a more active Chinese decision to build on coincidences of interest with the United States, together with the fear that this strategy might in the end be unworkable—hence the need for an ‘insurance policy’ in case the relationship should deteriorate significantly. Evelyn Goh, Meeting the China challenge: the US in Southeast Asian regional security strategies, Policy Studies 16 (Washington DC: East–West Center, 2005), pp. viii and 2–3. For other important contributions to this debate over the nature of Chinese strategy, see Gries, ‘China eyes the hegemon’, who writes of ‘bargaining, binding, and buffering’; and Goldstein, Rising to the challenge, who describes it as a ‘strategy of transition’ which ‘aims to avoid the provocative consequences of the more straightforward hegemonic and balancing strategies’ (pp. 38–9). He has also described it as a ‘neo-Bismarckian strategy’. See Goldstein, ‘An emerging China’s emerging grand strategy: a neo-Bismarckian turn?’, in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds, International relations theory and the Asia–Pacific (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

33 Huang Renwei has put it thus: ‘One of China’s priorities in maintaining an advantageous international environment lies in reassuring relations with her neighbors and preventing a net work of constraint being built by the U.S. in surrounding areas.’ See On the international and external environments for a rising China, SASS Papers 9 (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2003), p. 84.

34 According to David Zweig and Bi Jianhai, ‘China’s combined share of the world’s consumption of aluminum, copper, nickel and iron ore more than doubled within only ten years, from 7 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2000; it has now reached about 20 percent and is likely to double again by the end of the decade.’ Two decades ago, China was East Asia’s largest oil exporter, but ‘now it is the world’s second-largest importer’. See ‘China’s global hunt for energy’, Foreign Affairs 84: 5, Sept.–Oct 2005, esp. p. 25.
coalitions. True, China has put effort into developing the Asian-only APT, and the intention is to hold an East Asian Summit at the end of 2005, without US participation. In addition, its relationship with Moscow has matured to the point where the two regimes are embarking on joint military exercises. In July 2005, the SCO members called on the United States to set a timetable for the closing of American military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But Beijing also realizes that many of the Asian states within the APT and SCO are likely to retain close ties with the US for military and economic reasons. Nor can Russia be entirely relied upon—as witness its initial attempts to strike a deal with the US to limit missile defence schemes, and its negotiation of an oil pipeline agreement with Japan rather than China. Russia remains uneasy about the rise of Chinese influence and material power, and these reservations inhibit the deepening of their relationship and limit the impact of the interests they share. As Shi has bluntly put it, ‘there will be for a very long-term no possibility to form and maintain an international united front consolidated enough, strong enough, effective enough and permanent enough to balance against this [US] preponderance’. This perspective reinforces the assumption that America cannot be balanced, bolstering the views of those Chinese who argue from a more optimistic standpoint that there may be some potential for China to engage in long-term cooperation with the United States, and that America’s long-standing presence in the region should be recognized as a stabilizing factor.

Furthermore, there is little substance as yet to the argument that China is engaged in directly challenging US military power, for two main reasons: first, it accepts that the US military lead is so great that it will be surpassed either never or only in some far-distant future; and second, China’s concern with domestic development has ruled out Soviet-era-style arms racing. Undoubtedly there has been an acceleration in the Chinese conventional military buildup since 1999, entailing double-digit increases in spending and changes in doctrine in order to put China in a position to fight high-tech local wars and to project power in the Asia-Pacific region. Weapons purchases from Russia have been a regular feature of China’s military procurement. However, several commentators seem to agree that in the short to medium term, the main prompt for strengthening military capability is the issue of Taiwan, the specific goal being to coerce the island into reunifying with the mainland while deterring the United States from intervening on Taipei’s side, were China to decide to use

35 Several articles in *International Security* 30: 1, Summer 2005, explore the concept of ‘soft balancing’ in response to US power and behaviour, some claiming that it is indeed occurring, and that China, among others, has embarked upon it. Other authors argue that there is little evidence to support this.


37 The Director General for Asian Affairs in China’s foreign ministry, Cui Tiankai, is reported to have said: ‘We [China] should not try to exclude the United States from our region. The U.S. has a long-standing and huge presence here and should contribute to regional security, stability, and development.’ Quoted in Shambaugh, ‘China engages Asia’, p. 91. Wang Jisi points to Washington and Beijing’s common interests in his ‘China’s search for stability with America’.
force in response to a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence. The longer term is less certain. China may in time seek to challenge other states such as India, Japan, Russia and the United States itself; but I would argue that the outcome is not preordained, being contingent on events and on Chinese interpretations of how best to reach their goals—and, of course, on how other countries reach theirs.

Beyond this, China has embarked on modernization of its nuclear weapons programme. However, as a RAND study of this modernization has argued, ‘there are a number of impetuses behind’ it, ‘none of which involve recent changes in the international security environment’. Instead, they should be understood as responses to ‘long-term strategic shifts’, including the need to replace ageing weapons systems, and the ‘shifting postures of traditional nuclear powers, such as Russia and the United States, and emerging nuclear powers in Asia, particularly India’. Added to this are Chinese concerns, going back several decades, about the credibility of the country’s nuclear deterrent, undoubtedly a worry that has deepened in the light of US deployment of missile defences and reports in the US Nuclear Posture Review of 2002 about the targeting of China. Moreover, China has always regarded a nuclear weapons capacity as crucial to a strategy designed to prevent it being ‘bullied’, as Mao put it, or contained and coerced, as his successors might put it today. China’s military modernization, in both conventional and unconventional arenas, is quite consistent with the hedging strategy argued for above.

**Chinese perspectives on an alternative, fairer, world order**

Chinese scholars have sometimes castigated the country’s leadership for failing to articulate a ‘systematic approach to dealing with the existing “U.S.-led” world order’, describing the principles and goals of China’s foreign policy as ‘abstractions, such as “establishing a new international political and economic order,” “promoting world peace and common development,” “accelerating...”

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multipolarization,” and “opposing hegemonism and power politics’’.40 From Shi Yinhong’s perspective, ‘China in her rising is still far from having developed a system of clear and coherent long-term fundamental national objectives, diplomatic philosophy and long-term or secular grand strategy’.41 He has suggested that the country’s strategy over the next 30–50 years (or more) should involve twin approaches: first, bandwagoning, defined as cooperating with the ‘first-rate great power and the international regimes supported by it, and thereby obtaining its support and protection and other possible benefits, though at the cost of one’s own freedom of action reduced by some degree’; but second, over the medium to long term, ‘transcending’ this accommodation by contributing to the peaceful transformation of international society from one dominated or controlled by western great powers to one in which the West, and especially the United States, accepts the need to coexist in an equal and reasonable manner with newly rising non-western states.42

What Shi implies by this term ‘transcending’ (as also articulated by Chinese officials) is the need to ‘democratize’ international relations—to the point, at least, of taking account of the interests of a greater range of major states. However, as Chinese scholars state, these officials often have been rather elliptical about what precisely those interests might be. Former foreign minister Qian Qichen described the necessary components in January 2004 as a ‘new security concept’ based on ‘mutual trust and benefit, equality, and cooperation’, the five principles of peaceful coexistence which promote the idea of a pluralist, sovereignty-based world order, and strong support for the UN and its Charter. He put most emphasis on the last factor, describing the UN as the ‘most universal, representative, and authoritative international organization in the world’, and called on states to make ‘common efforts to actively uphold the authority and dominant status of the United Nations in international affairs’.43 President Hu Jintao has added some economic content to this rather familiar set of ideas, calling for ‘reform and improvement of international financial systems’, and calling on developed countries to do more for developing countries: open their markets further, eliminate trade barriers, increase financial and technical support, and offer debt relief. Hu has also advocated that the North help the South benefit from economic globalization. In the same statement, he too mentioned the critical need to maintain the authority of the UN, a demand that is repeated in most if not all official Chinese statements on international affairs, including China’s official position paper on UN reform.45

40 Wang, ‘China’s changing role in Asia’, p. 6.
There is, however, a problem with this Chinese fixation on the UN as a source of authority: namely, that (in part at least) Beijing appears to value the organization precisely because it is not democratic but hierarchical in its structure. China welcomes the constraints the institution could theoretically impose on US power, but it also values the status benefits it derives from permanent membership of the Security Council, and especially the influence that comes with the privilege of the veto. Hence on UN reform Beijing stresses the need to enhance the ‘authority and efficiency of the Council and strengthening its capacity’; and, while acknowledging the need to increase developing-country representation on the Security Council, it implies that this is best done through rotating membership on a regional basis.46

Undoubtedly, Chinese perceptions of a fairer, more democratic world order have US action in their sights. According to a weekly news journal published by the official Chinese news agency, whereas China was trying to ‘assimilate itself into and transform the existing international order’, the US wanted to ignore existing international laws and norms and rewrite the rules. Another commentator agreed, pointing out that, while at home the US practises democracy and is proud to be governed by the rule of law, ‘in the realm of international relations, the United States opposes any constraints, despises the United Nations, violates international law, obstructs democratic principles, and disobeys the will of the people in the whole world against war. It upholds the supremacy of force, pursues free unilateral action, and openly advocates imperialist rule of the world.’ In the view of this writer, ‘a just and democratic international order can only be built on the basis of international law and multilateral negotiation and cooperation’.47 What democratization of international relations predominantly means for some, therefore, is democratizing or constraining US hegemonic behaviour.

No one in China thinks this is going to be easy. One part of the Chinese strategy is to accentuate features of US behaviour that it believes need to be exposed: in Beijing’s view, the US is hegemonic, unilateralist, dismissive of international law and the United Nations, and wedded to ‘zero-sum’ concepts of security that ignore non-traditional security concerns and the negative effects of the security dilemma. It is also economically protectionist. Another is to promote globalization and multipolarity as key and linked concepts in the desired democratization of world affairs: the former by highlighting the importance of transnational forces and threats of a wide-ranging kind (economic crisis, drug trafficking, epidemics, terrorism, etc.), which often require a multilateral cooperative security approach in order effectively to deal with them;48 the

48 Alastair Iain Johnston has made a powerful case that those from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs charged with multilateral diplomacy within bodies such as the ARF have come to accept that multilateralism is intrinsically ““good” for Chinese and regional security.” See his ‘Socialization in international
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latter by emphasizing a kind of ‘concert of great powers’ system which endeavours to forge multilateral cooperation among the major states within international institutions such as the UN.

Conclusion

China’s view of the global order is centred on the US and mainly relates to the potential effects of US policy on its core goals of economic development and domestic stability. There seem to be two dominant policy perspectives at the base of Beijing’s strategy in this unipolar world; both hope for accommodation with the US, but they differ over the possibility of maintaining cooperation over the long term. Given that level of uncertainty, China seems to have chosen the prudent course of avoiding unduly antagonizing the United States while establishing a web of relationships with other states and state-based bodies that could serve to provide China with a degree of leverage were this to prove necessary—for example, in the case of conflict with the US over Taiwan, or US attempts at coercion or containment of China. A minority of Chinese also believe that globalization, together with China’s embrace of a development strategy that rests on market-led liberal economic reform, rules out any option for Beijing other than building cooperative economic and political ties, and that other states in this globalized world have reached a similar understanding and are similarly constrained.

Although China undoubtedly would like to be recognized as an equal to the United States in international relations, it realizes that this is unlikely to happen any time soon. In the meantime, its goal is a more egalitarian world system, which it hopes to achieve by stressing the benefits of multilateral institutional arrangements whereby US power might be diluted, and by emphasizing that one of the major effects of globalization has been to put new issues on the security agenda whose resolution will require cooperative, often non-military, strategies. However, it is not clear that Chinese leaders have a well-worked-out plan for how to gain wide acceptance of these means of reaching an alternative world order beyond the regional level, where Beijing is better able to shape the agendas of the existing multilateral organizations. On the global level it appears more uncertain and its policy positions lack coherence. The UN is perceived as an important, even vital, body which needs to enhance its authority, but over UN reform China’s specific proposals appear conservative: it supports new developing-country membership of the Security Council, but seems still to be reluctant to dilute the veto or to establish additional permanent members. Within the WTO, while it will join with the G20, it will probably not be seeking overtly to lead the coalition.

institutions: the ASEAN way and international relations theory’, in Ikenberry and Mastanduno, eds, *International relations theory*, p.132. While I can agree that some in the ministry have come to this positive perspective on multilateralism, my overall argument assumes the dominant Chinese perspective on multilateralism to be that it is helpful in promoting China’s ‘insurance’ or ‘hedging’ policy.
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China is neither part of, nor determinedly seeking to build, anti-hegemonic coalitions. Consequently, other emerging states such as Brazil, India or Russia should not expect too much in the way of sustained cooperation from China on this front, assuming they are interested in forming such coalitions. It is unlikely to stick out for negotiating positions that the US would see as seriously detrimental to its interests. This approach seems likely to change only were China to become convinced that it faced sustained US hostility.

Beijing’s leaders remain preoccupied with their relationship with the US, Hu Jintao reportedly describing America in 2002 as the ‘central thread in China’s foreign policy strategy’. A consequence of this preoccupation is that its strategy is fixed only in the broadest of terms, and largely remains contingent on what is decided in Washington as a reaction to China’s rise. Beijing’s policy, therefore, is not determined simply by inequalities in the distribution of power: it is not US hegemony as such that influences China’s policies, but how that hegemonic position is used, especially with reference to China itself.

49 Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, China’s new rulers: the secret files (London: Granta, 2003), p. 207.