

China as a G2 Member: What are the Political Constraints?

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Listen to remarks of President Obama in his visit this week to China:

- we have “no choice” but to have China be a major part of big decisions
- Obama is said to have acknowledged that there is no G2 because China doesn’t like alliances.
- Chinese policy-makers and scholars have been saying this often ever since the idea came up.
- But to the extent that we need extensive cooperation with China, what kind of cooperation can we expect it to be – what will be the quality of cooperation?
- In the G2 context, this really translates into the question of what kind of international leadership potential is China showing itself to have?
- The PRC has not (yet) developed these qualities. Why? My comments today focus on Chinese domestic political constraints on China’s cooperation and leadership.

I focus on domestic political constraints that often go ignored. These points are not exhaustive but, as I said, are not frequently articulated.

I will NOT be talking about other constraints that are often raised¹:

- constraints due to China’s poverty and status as a developing country—why it cannot take on large international burdens. This is China’s preferred narrative about why China cannot be a leader.

¹ Today’s talk, moreover, will not address problems arising from China’s political decentralization; while important, the constraints posed to cooperation by decentralization and local political power is related more to implementation *following* cooperation than hindrance to cooperation attempts themselves.

- China's core security interests that make the idea of cooperation difficult. This discussion involves metrics that most policy-makers and realist scholars will focus on when discussing global leadership.
- These are both important but, as I said, I want to focus on less noted but also important determinants of Chinese leadership propensity.

Instead, I wish to talk about two broad constraints that are not often recognized, in part because they are not easy to quantify.

1. Certain dynamics of domestic leadership
2. How these dynamics translate to global leadership

I. Domestic Political constraints²

A. Important to contextualize those comments by saying to start that China's political system has improved in many ways in recent years – has gained tremendously in capability and capacity. This has positively affected foreign policy-making.

- Chinese foreign-policy making is more regularized and transparent.
- The diplomatic and foreign policy bureaucracy corps are highly professionalized and offices are peopled by highly trained officials.
- As China's presence on the global stage has broadened and deepened, more bureaus and offices have been created to help manage all these issue areas.
- Policy-making also is more porous, meaning open to a wider range and variety of participants from within and, to some degree from outside of the party-state foreign policy apparatus.

B. Despite the increase in professionalization and capability, the Chinese political system is not designed to yield strong international leaders, at least on today's model. Why not? 3 reasons in addition to those often offered

1. First, the top agenda items for the leadership in China are domestic issues – primarily growth and stability. It is almost as if foreign relations, except insofar as they enhance China's stature, are a pesky

sideshow to the real business of economic development and dealing with domestic problems. This fact discourages bold global leadership on foreign policy issues.

2. Second, despite what we expect from the Party system, there appears to be no overall plan or blueprint for China's foreign policy trajectory – indeed, China appears to be “crossing river by feeling stones” in foreign policy as well as did in economic reform. This seems rather jarring, because we expect communist nations to excel at planning. But this has not been the way in reform China.
3. Third, is a set of issues related to the nature of the system that produces leaders in China. Often we like to speak as if there is no communist party, but cannot be ignored.
 - norm of collective leadership – After Deng came to power, a strong effort was made to be sure that no one leader could go unchecked.
 - Thus, with each successive regime of leaders, and especially in the current Hu-Wen regime, we see (or to the extent that we can see it) decision-making is collective. This seems to be true even in crisis situations, as with the recent North Korean nuclear tests and missile launches and the reactions.
 - Contrasts w/ Bruce Reynolds story of a strong and rapid response, but fact is we do not see that in foreign policy.
 - See Zhu Rongji, a strong leader, and certainly not perfect, as an exception.
 - No single leader can get out in front of the collective leadership as a whole.
- This is not necessarily bad, but it does mean decisions are more likely to be compromises, hedging bets and unlikely to make major turns in policy or difficult decisions. Makes cautious.
- The collective leadership mechanism's inducement to caution goes hand-in-hand with Communist Party norms of succession. Hu Jintao's succession to the presidency after Jiang was the most “normal” of any in the communist era, and presumed successor Xi Jinping's appears to be following suit.
- Their behavior reveals that the best way to get to the top is by keeping your head down, appearing relatively non-controversial.
- There is no selection mechanism to encourage bold statements, at least in public.

- Thus far, anyway, the caution and relatively facelessness of leadership has left little room for one figure – presumably the President - to emerge as a global leader.
- Of course, the Chinese leaders will have weight due the fact that he is the undisputed head of the world’s largest and most populous country, and this translates to a place at the table, but this does not automatically translate to global leadership.

II: Broader FP behavior patterns that cut against at G2 cooperation

The above comments were largely about how the Chinese domestic political system is not geared to produce domestic leaders that translate their authority to international leadership. How, more specifically, does this play out for China on the world stage? Here, we have to delve into “soft” norms of Chinese perceptions of its place in the world.

We may be led to *think* of China as having an ideology that dictates specific actions because there is relevant doctrine:

- “non-hegemonism,”
- “multipolarity”
- “peaceful rise”
- be a bridge to the developing world.
- “peace and development,” which says, essentially, what I’ve been saying: keep your head down and maintain a peaceful external environment, under cover of the US security umbrella, so that you can develop the economy.

Yet most of these are not operationalized with strong global leadership. Rather, as they are operationalized in China now, they are used to support a profile of shallow engagements, reactive or hedging strategies, and positioning as a follower rather than a leader.

- The PRC has never been keen on even loose alliances (Sino-Soviet period being an exception, and if anything this provides a negative example). This may reflect a deep realist culture, as some have said. It certainly is similar to what we used to attribute to Mao: desire for maximal flexibility.

- But rather than making and breaking friendships, as Maoist dialectics would suggest, the current strategy is to make friends – call it strategic partnerships or what have you – with everybody, develop an institutional architecture for conversation, consultation, regular meetings, etc, but develop few deep commitments.
- These institutional maneuverings can of course be converted to use to take action, and sometimes it is. China's relations w/ ASEAN is perhaps the best example.
- But for the most part these remain shallow relationships.
 - SCO development as an institution is relatively weak.
- Hedging – recent cooperation with India to avoid being railroaded in Copenhagen on climate change – to support developing countries.
- China often takes a back seat:
 - Under cover of Brazil and India (floating ideas of not relying so heavily on US dollar as global currency, and backpedaling at BRIC, Cancun examples)
 - As a result, the PRC has not developed coattails that can bring others along.
- Some of this is due to the cautious leadership – as above
- Some is due to idea of FP as a pesky sideshow – this causes the PRC government to be more reactive
- Some is due to lack of a clear vision as to what they actively want to do as a big power – no blueprint

Bottom line: characteristics of global leadership do not fit this picture.