

## MAKING SENSE OF THE CHINA COMPLEX

*by Andrea Chloe A. Wong*

As China asserts its presence in the international community, it incites various levels of pessimism and anxiety about its present attitude and future aspirations. Just a decade ago, most countries welcomed China's increasing influence in global affairs with optimism. In recent years, however, several nations are increasingly fearful of its provocative actions particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. This changed global perception indicates the difficulties of fully understanding China that ultimately leads to a grand dilemma that this paper calls the "China complex".

The "China complex" broadly refers to the varied assessments on the country's development as a rising power fuelled by its growing economy and increasing military strength. It represents the extensive yet divisive discourse on China that ultimately reveals a medley of characterizations about the country. For the world to understand the China complex, it is important to be familiar with the global debates surrounding its identity. This is because in international politics, a state's identity, and not just its power, is integral in identifying its interests and in interpreting its behavior.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore imperative to evaluate China's various identities to understand its global rhetoric and actions. This should equip states to prescribe appropriate policies that will result in constructive engagement with China as it increasingly becomes more involved in international affairs and interdependent with the rest of the world.

### *China as hostile and benign*

Generally, the China complex points to the decades-old query on China's 'rise' either as a revisionist or a status quo power – a looming threat or a source of opportunity in the international community. This recurring debate arises when issues pertaining to China's behavior spark concerns and anxieties from other countries, particularly those from its immediate neighborhood.

As China seems to be displaying its military muscle in recent years, some analysts, particularly from the realist school, claim that its development will be disruptive. They view China's actions to be challenging the global order because it is dissatisfied with the existing international structure and the current power relations.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, its rapid economic growth is bound to trigger a zero-sum game overtaking the current global hegemon.<sup>3</sup>

Others believe, however, that China will develop peacefully and will maintain the status quo. They believe that China will not "trigger a wrenching hegemonic transition"<sup>4</sup> because not all great power interactions "are intrinsically zero-sum struggles but complex mixtures of interdependence, cooperation amid competition, and structural adjustments."<sup>5</sup> This view is reinforced by official statements from Chinese officials and analysts,<sup>6</sup> claiming that China is foremost committed to its own domestic issues concerning the welfare of its people. Thus, from the Chinese perspective, the Chinese government will avoid unnecessary international confrontation that may jeopardize the economic gains it has so far achieved.

These perceptions on China either as a hostile or benign power oscillate whenever its actions are deemed suspicious and unpredictable. At present, this dichotomy is particularly evident as China simultaneously draws on its accumulated hard power to advance its national interests and promotes its soft power to convince the world of its peaceful development.

*China with multiple identities*

The China complex also underscores the country as having multiple identities. It pertains to the many faces China projects to the world, emphasizing that “China has no single international identity but rather a series of identities that is sometimes conflicting.”<sup>7</sup> These identities are – as a major power, a regional player, and a developing country that became apparent about two decades after China’s ‘opening up’ to the world in 1978.

- *A major power.* China has been one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council since 1971. It has extensive influence and wide-ranging interests that compel it to make selected contributions in the international community. However, some critics view China as a “free rider,” riding on the actions of other major powers while staking a claim to moral high ground.”<sup>8</sup> While the country is a global stakeholder seeking many of the rights and privileges of a great power, it seems to be avoiding the obligations and responsibilities that go with it. This is reinforced by global perceptions of the Chinese government’s passive attitude on the mass atrocities in Darfur in 2007 and its decision to veto UN Security Council Resolutions from 2011 to 2013 to address the civil war in Syria.
- *A regional stakeholder.* China has embarked on a cooperative diplomacy in its neighborhood. This was apparent during the 1997 Asian financial crisis when it drew on its extensive foreign exchange reserves to assist distressed nations. It has also engaged the region through trade and investments, particularly through the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) that took effect in 2010. However, given its regional clout and more advanced military forces, it has recently adopted a more aggressive and provocative stance in its territorial claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea.
- *A developing country.* China faces similar development problems such as income gap, high unemployment rate, and energy shortages that other nations face.<sup>9</sup> Because of these, China highly regards its relations with the Global South and advocates for the interests of its client states in the developing world. Despite its significant economic growth and considerable global influence, it will continue to embrace this long-standing identity intended to ward off international pressures on issues such as free trade, human rights, environment protection, among others.

These multiple identities are expected to characterize China in the long term. These will be reinforced especially as the Chinese themselves do not share a common outlook on what exactly China is. On the one hand, some scholars uphold the idea that China is a major power and its influence is already “large enough to disturb international political stability by shifting its strategic stance.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Chinese government downplays its current strengths in foreign policy making, “claiming that there is no easy way to transmute its economic weight into political influence.”<sup>11</sup> This perception is reinforced by some Chinese economists who contend that China is not yet a major power – arguing instead that it remains a developing country despite its status as the world’s second largest economy.<sup>12</sup>

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Others, however, believe that China is at most a regional power with its influence more pronounced in Asia than in the rest of the world, limited in its capacity for agenda-setting and norm-making in the international system.<sup>13</sup> These contending perspectives essentially reveal China’s convoluted identities, creating wariness among countries on the different roles that the country assumes as it faces specific international issues at hand.

*China as the Great Power and the Inferior Victim*

In addition, the China complex pertains to the country as advocating a “great power mentality” but still suffering from some “inferiority complex.” The initial stirrings of its great power mentality are hinged on the following: (1) China has been a great power historically and seeks to return to that status; and (2) China wants to be esteemed and respected by the international community for its economic achievements and its unique rise as a power.

Its deeply held desire for restored pride and dignity as well as longstanding aspiration for international respect somehow reflects existing insecurities held by China. Interestingly, these “fixations” are also regarded as the fuel that fires up modern Chinese nationalism. Any disregard or offense by other countries against China’s pride and aspirations is subject to nationalist sentiments and indignation among the Chinese that sometimes lead to violent protests.

However, while it has regained a noticeable confidence as a nation, China is still perceived as suffering from an inferiority complex. This is based on the idea of: 1) China as an aggrieved nation that suffered a history of victimhood and humiliation from Japan and from the West; (2) China as a victim of a global containment strategy by the US and other countries that are ganging up against it; and (3) China as a developing country facing various domestic problems that sometimes constrain its ability to actively pursue its international interests.

Evidently, the world perceives China with these characterization, thus, the wide-ranging perceptions that seem contradictory and reveal its ambiguity. Hence, it is perhaps prudent to generally define China as an ambivalent nation, which ironically serves as its most accurate description.

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### *Recognizing China’s interests*

To effectively deal with this China complex, countries can actually focus on what is definitive and knowable about China. What is apparent is China’s steadfast pursuit of its national interests. These interests are the essential constant and the driving force behind China’s vision, rhetoric, and actions.

Understanding Chinese interests ultimately provides a rational basis to predict China’s behavior in the international community. These interests involve three components: 1) preservation of China’s basic state system and national security; 2) national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and 3) the continued stable development of China’s economy. They are regarded as China’s “core interests” that are fundamentally nonnegotiable in nature. The Chinese government will not hesitate to project a level of rigidity, even to the extent of military posturing against any foreign activities that may undermine its official position. These “core interests” have been invoked and asserted by Chinese officials in controversial issues such as “US arms sales to Taiwan, meetings between foreign leaders and the Dalai Lama, and disputed territories in the South China Sea.”<sup>14</sup>

In the long term, a stronger China is expected to enlarge the scope and definition of its core interests that shall induce the expansion of its international concerns commensurate with its size and influence. This may eventually include other contentious issues on trade deals and human rights, which can pose as a challenge for countries in their relations with China. Aside from these, China also has other interests that are open to negotiations. These include domestic interests and global concerns such as poverty reduction, environmental management, international migration, and other non-traditional security issues.

A more nuanced awareness of China’s interests also enables the world to logically determine the identities that the country assumes on international issues. For example, China acts as a regional power that is deemed hostile by some countries in Asia. This is reflected in its unyielding stance and aggressive actions to uphold its territorial sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands that are contested by Japan. Its territorial interests are also underpinned by China’s determined drive to stand up against Japan, regarded as the evil oppressor in Chinese history and a strategic threat to its influence in the region. This depicts China not only as a rational actor that protects its interests, but also a great power that possesses a victim mentality. Consequently, its aggressive conduct related to its claimed territories, compounded with its historical issues with Japan, can be viewed by other countries as a threat to the peace and security in the region.

In addition, recognizing China’s interests reveals its identity as a developing country, particularly when addressing the issue on climate change. The Chinese government does not want to commit to legally binding greenhouse gas emission limits, since such commitment slows down the country’s economic development. Instead, it merely proposed to put a ceiling on its emissions in 2016.<sup>15</sup> China also wants developed countries to take responsibility for their historical

cumulative emissions that led to their industrialization; and to account for their current high per capita emissions towards substantial reduction of their emissions.<sup>16</sup> However, China's position on climate change as a developing country is quite thorny and controversial, given that it is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, responsible for a quarter of the world's carbon emissions.

Identifying China's interests reduces global frustrations in comprehending its rhetoric and conduct. International criticisms abound regarding the Chinese government's inconsistencies between what it says and what it does, especially on several contentious issues. For instance, China expresses its support for a "peaceful resolution on the South China Sea issue, which does not resort to the use of force or the threat of force. It is safeguarding its own legitimate rights and not infringing upon others."<sup>17</sup> And yet the Chinese government continues to encroach on other countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the South China Sea based on its historical claims. Its provocative actions include the establishment of territorial markers and structures in the area, illegal exploration of maritime resources, seizure and harassment of fishing boats within the claimed boundaries of Vietnam and the Philippines. This discrepancy essentially highlights that, although China wants to be perceived as a responsible regional power, its utmost regard for its territorial sovereignty takes precedence.

This results in increased wariness and growing mistrust against China, which reinforces the China threat theory. To make sense of this discrepancy, as revealed in the China complex, requires taking into account the constancy of its national interests to which, like all other states, it is firmly and resolutely dedicated to uphold. Doing so enables countries to see through beyond China's words, as well as to calculate and recognize (though not necessarily agreeing to) its actions.

#### *Crafting policies on China*

An awareness of the whole gamut of China's identities and interests can lessen the tendency by other countries to employ simplistic and permanent labels that define their relations with China – partner, friend, competitor, rival– which may not hold true all the time. These usually result in suspicions and disappointments whenever China fails to live up to the expectations prescribed in those labels. Moreover, such labels bring with it an associated set of policy prescriptions: cooperate, confront, contain and so on, which may not also be appropriate if employed separately.<sup>18</sup> Implementing each of these policies rigidly may only lead to frustration and miscalculations by any country in its dealings with China. Over the years, however, states have employed a combination of policies that will effectively relate to China and simultaneously serve their varied interests.

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For instance, most countries in Africa regard China as an important economic and development partner. Aside from the USD 200 billion worth of trade between the two parties, there is also an estimated 800 Chinese corporations doing business in the infrastructure, energy, and banking sectors in Africa. Since 2000, China has cancelled more than USD 10 billion in debts in the region and has also continued to offer huge loans with low interest rates and no political conditions attached.<sup>19</sup>

However, some African countries have become increasingly wary of China's addictive quest for the continent's energy and natural resources. This is evident in China's heavy investments in the Angolan and Sudanese oil industries and its attempt to secure some shares from new oil finds in Ghana and Uganda,<sup>20</sup> which raise suspicion of Chinese exploitation and expansionism in the region. Other countries also criticize Chinese companies for poaching and illegal mining; abusing the rights of their African workers; and undercutting local traders as they flood markets with cheap goods. This has resulted in recent anti-Chinese sentiments in places like Zambia, Nigeria and South Africa.

These perceptions have led many to question whether China is a development partner, a new colonizer, or a resource and labor exploiter in Africa. In reality, there is basis for all these assumptions about China, which essentially reveals its

asymmetrically interdependent relationship with Africa. These observations generally point to China's economic interests to gain much-needed resources for its rapid industrial development, which motivates its conduct in the region. This prompts countries in Africa to carefully craft and calibrate policies that will protect their own economic interests vis-à-vis China's. Such policies are expected to highlight a balance of cooperative yet cautious strategies that will attract trade and investments from the Chinese government, and at the same time, preserve Africa's natural resources, protect its local industries, and safeguard the rights and welfare of its domestic workers.

*Limited choice: engage with China*

The world can also effectively deal with the China complex by building greater familiarity with it. Regardless of the uncertainties (and sometimes antagonism) behind China's aspirations and behavior, countries have limited choice but to broadly engage with it. This involves gaining first-hand experiences in China and establishing face-to-face contacts with the Chinese. The goal is to expand and adjust global perceptions of China based on its realities, which should induce more informed interaction and encourage productive relations with it.

A broad engagement with China may bring about a global paradigm shift from a simplistic view to a more holistic perspective on what is actually a very multifaceted country. It reduces global tendencies to succumb to simplistic "either good or bad" interpretations of foreign leaders and observers, as well as dramatic portrayals from foreign journalists that either romanticize or demonize China. A first-hand experience on China is expected to immerse people on the great AND grave things about it and expose them to BOTH its dazzling successes and dark realities.

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This essentially promotes awareness against painting a sweeping picture of the country that is constantly shaped by various factors and circumstances. On the one hand, some observers grossly exaggerate the success of China's modernization without considering the many detriments in its progress, such as environmental degradation, income inequality, and widespread corruption. On the other hand, other analysts paint a gloomy image of China's eventual breakdown as it experiences such domestic problems, overlooking the Chinese government's cautious management of the country's modernization.

In addition, having frequent interactions with China can induce other countries to manage their expectations on it. Despite its great power status, China cannot contribute more to the international community beyond what it can offer. Despite its large geographic size and considerable diplomatic influence, it is presently facing very complicated social and economic development issues, many of them typical of developing countries but of a much larger scale.

Moreover, having an expansive engagement with China allows other countries to compartmentalize political issues with functional areas for cooperation. This also prevents conflicts at the state level from spilling over on the people-to-people level. This should be taken into serious consideration, especially since tensions and disputes between Chinese and other foreign governments carry over to the public domain that usually result in hostilities or violence.

For instance, in the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, you have the Chinese on the one hand, and the Filipinos and the Vietnamese on the other. At the height of the Scarborough Shoal standoff between the Philippines and China in 2012, Filipino and Chinese netizens engaged in cyber-attacks damaging their respective countries' private and government websites. Moreover after the Chinese government moved an oil rig 120 nautical miles off the coast of Vietnam in May 2014, thousands of Vietnamese staged violent anti-Chinese protests at industrial parks in southern Vietnam. The protests resulted in the burning of several factories, including Taiwanese and Singaporean plants, which were mistaken as Chinese owned.

To encourage more constructive engagement with China, governments play a critical role in expanding trade activities, stimulating investments, and promoting cultural exchanges. Chinese and foreign governments can pave the way for public interaction to flourish and strengthen mutual understanding.

There are already signs that various governments are making efforts to develop understanding and establish ties with China. In Asia, there are more than 180,000 students that make up 64 percent of the total number of foreign students studying in China in 2011.<sup>21</sup> In Europe, there are various government-organized trade and tourism exhibits to encourage business links between European and Chinese companies. For its part, the Chinese government is also organizing cooperative activities to promote its soft power abroad. It has poured substantial investments on a variety of programs such as academic exchanges to encourage more in-depth insights on China, as well as cultural activities that highlight the country's rich heritage and traditions. It has also established and expanded institutions overseas such as its local media outlets and Confucius Institutes to reach the global public.

As the world engages with China, the Chinese government is also employing its "charm offensive" to minimize the global "trust deficit" against China and to create a more benign image of the country overseas. This is quite evident despite some international criticisms that such programs were merely "external propaganda work." But while China actively promotes its soft power, the world would feel more reassured if China commits to using its hard power less in the future.<sup>22</sup> This is important for the Chinese government to consider especially in light of global cynicism about its current overbearing actions and the unpredictability of its future behavior.

### *The future of the China Complex*

China's growing influence has led to this discourse on the ambiguity, dichotomy, and contradictions that is the China complex. This will continue to characterize the nation especially since the Chinese themselves are still unsure of what China is going to be as it continues to "grow." The future of China remains vague as Chinese officials and scholars debate about the opportunities, dangers, risks and responsibilities that China's increasing global influence entail.

The world will continue to cope with this reality and accept the fact that the many questions surrounding the country are without any definitive and conclusive answers. These debates will likely reveal a polarizing image of the country and will remain so in the long term as countries look at China through various lenses according to their interests. As the world grapples with comprehending China, it is important to avoid narrow and rigid assumptions that paint an incomplete picture of the country, which has long characterized responses/reactions to China. Doing so will enable other countries to craft appropriate policies to effectively deal with China. ❁

### Endnotes

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