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China, America, and a New World Order

18/05/2010 15:52 by admin

By Ambassador Richard S. Williamson Tuesday, May 18, 2010

Filed under: World Watch, Culture, Government & Politics

For years the major question regarding China has been whether it will embrace the post-World War II order. The answer is no.

The global financial crisis has telescoped shifts in the world order, especially for a rising China.

For many years, the major strategic question regarding China has been whether, as it grows in economic, political, and military might, it will embrace the post-World War II order: the treaties, multilateral institutions, and norms developed largely with United States leadership. The answer is no. China will not adapt to the existing global

That is the conclusion I draw from a recent trip to Beijing and meetings with people in the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party and government. For them, this is not an irrational approach to transacting affairs on the world stage. For us, this presents numerous challenges that might imperil our own interests.

Every time I return to China, I am impressed by its energy and economic growth. During the past 30 years, China's economic juggernaut has lifted 300 million Chinese into the middle class. Its 1.3 billion people provide abundant cheap labor and potentially a vast consumer market. Its dazzling modern infrastructure provides a backbone for continued growth. Its vast and high-quality university system is producing enormous numbers of well-trained computer scientists, engineers, and physicists to feed innovation and insure high productivity. It holds substantial amounts of U.S. debt. And, recently, China passed Germany as the world's largest exporting nation.

China is presenting alternative visions for the world order. It's a vision of strengthened sovereignty rather than collegial, collective, cooperative multilateralism in a "flat" world in which multilateralism, values, and new economic forces permeate state borders.

In my recent trip to China, I found its leaders emboldened by recent developments. The global financial crisis created the Great Recession in America, Europe, and most of the world. Meanwhile, China's economy continued to grow at a nearly double-digit rate. This has reinforced China's conviction that its system of a market economy tightly circumscribed by political and civil society controls is superior to unfettered free markets, free trade, and open societies.

The enormous costs America has paid in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and the uncertain future in both have reinforced the Chinese reluctance to engage in many urgent global challenges. The Chinese see America's strength sapped while they grow stronger.

In a conversation about Iran's nuclear program and global terrorism, a senior government official instructed me that "perhaps America should learn how to act more friendly in the world so it would not have so many enemies." He went on to say that he doesn't "lose sleep over Iran."

Arrogance and Insecurity

At the same time that their confidence, even arrogance, grows towards the outside world, China's leaders also are deeply insecure. As Professor Susan Shirk wrote in her book *China: Fragile Superpower*,

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“China’s leaders are obsessed with what they call ‘social stability,’ in other words, the prevention of large-scale unrest that could bring down the Communist regime. All authoritarian regimes have tenuous legitimacy, but China’s rapid economic growth has created further acute stress.

China’s leaders have ample reason for their concerns. For while 300 million Chinese are beneficiaries of their economic miracle, 1 billion have been left behind. And these mostly rural Chinese, still living meager lives, are increasingly aware of these economic inequities. Furthermore, there is growing discontent over menacing social problems such as rising pollution, rampant corruption, soaring unemployment, poor health services, food safety, drought, worker safety, Internet censorship, and numerous other transgressions real and imagined. One expert has said that in China there are over 200 protest demonstrations every day.

China’s economy continued to grow during the global financial crisis, reinforcing China’s conviction that its system of a market economy tightly circumscribed by political and civil society controls is superior to unfettered free markets, free trade, and open societies.

To combat social unrest, China’s leaders tightly control civil society, monitor and censor news, limit Internet access, limit public demonstration, and use the other usual tools of authoritarian regimes. According to the Hong Kong newspaper Ming Pao, China “employs 21 million people in public security, dwarfing the approximately 3 million members who make the People’s Liberation Army the world’s largest military force.”

Also, China’s leaders believe they must extend economic prosperity from the coast to the inland rural areas. As only a regime that came to power from rural unrest can understand, China’s Communist Party is concerned about rural unrest. They must keep the economy growing at a breakneck pace. The imperative of securing raw materials from abroad, such as oil and minerals, explains China’s benign policies toward Sudan, Burma, Iran, and other global trouble spots.

At the same time, China’s economic progress depends on not provoking the United States. They need access to America’s consumer market, technology, and investments. Therefore, while many of the United States’ concerns—such as Iran’s nuclear capabilities and the “genocide in slow motion” in Darfur—are of much less interest to Beijing, for now, China constantly maneuvers to avoid diplomatic isolation. China feigns a loose condominium of interests with the international community. When required, China joins in symbolic acts such as UN sanctions on Iran, after degrading the language of any real bite. Similarly, its artificially low currency rate helps Chinese exports. China tenaciously resists adjustments to market rates followed by periodic nominal adjustments that ease international pressure without eliminating this illegal subsidy. This approach seems to work. China tries to avoid saying no while it tenaciously evades saying yes.

For Chinese authoritarian leaders intent on retaining their privileged positions of control, such tactics of transactional engagement with the United States and the international community seem reasonable. They buy off foreign pressure with titular accommodation. Meanwhile, their economy grows and they hope to gain more domestic social stability as their prominence and power grows on the world stage.

The Horizon Beyond

At the same time that their confidence, even arrogance, grows towards the outside world, China’s leaders also are deeply insecure.

China is presenting alternative visions for the world order. It’s a vision of strengthened sovereignty rather than collegial, collective, cooperative multilateralism in a “flat” world in which multilateralism, values, and new economic forces permeate state borders. What happens in Tibet, Taiwan, and with Internet censorship are affairs for Beijing and Beijing alone.

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It's a vision of development assistance driven solely by the donor country's domestic economic priorities, unhindered by annoying encumbrances such as recipient countries' human rights records. It is a world in which international organizations curtail the reach of American power. It's a search for a world order shaped by China's intellectual and political identity, not by integration into a system constructed by the United States and Europe.

As Mark Leonard writes in his book *What Does China Think?*, "China's own emancipation from the West has created an alternative, non-Western path for the rest of the world to follow … challenging Western influence in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union with a different model of globalization."

America must raise its sights to the horizon beyond the diplomatic knife fights with Beijing over currency rates, weak UN Security Council resolutions on Iran, and other crises of the day. While dealing with these matters, we must develop a long-term strategy to address the challenges of a rising China and its alternative world view. China is not America's enemy. But it is a worthy competitor. We need to engage China and work to influence history's arc so China's rise does not come at the expense of American interests.

Ambassador Richard S. Williamson is a principal at Salisbury Strategies, LLP. He has served as an ambassador and U.S. representative in several capacities to the United Nations, as an assistant secretary of State, as assistant to the president for intergovernmental affairs in the White House for President Ronald Reagan, and as chairman of the Illinois Republican Party. In January 2008, he was appointed special envoy to Sudan by President George W. Bush.

FURTHER READING: Williamson also discussed "Afghanistan's Historic Election" and "Human Rights and Democracy Betrayed" by the Obama Administration. Charles Calomiris explains how China is "Profiting From Government Stakes in a Command Economy," while Dan Blumenthal outlines "China's Grand Strategy."

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