THE RESURGENCE OF CHINA'S THIRD WORLD POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Ana Cristina Alves
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract
Although the developing world has been a constant feature in Beijing's foreign policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China, it has never before assumed such overpowering proportions, evidenced by its unprecedented economic presence and influence in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A variety of factors contributed to this new reality, which impact in the global geopolitical landscape is yet to be fully understood.
This article aims at analysing the factors behind the resurgence of the Third World in Chinese Foreign Policy in the 21st Century and discusses the ensuing strategic and political shifts in global governance.

Key words: New Chinese Foreign Policy - Soft Power – Developing countries – global governance

Resumo
Não obstante o Terceiro Mundo ser um tópico recorrente no discurso de Pequim desde a fundação da República Popular da China, nunca a sua materialização assumiu contornos tão concretos como no presente. Com efeito, nunca antes a presença e influência económica chinesa foi tão evidente em África, na Ásia e na América Latina como na actualidade. Vários são os factores que contribuíram para esta realidade, cujas consequências para o sistema internacional estão ainda por esclarecer na totalidade.
0 presente artigo visa analisar os factores que determinaram a revitalização do Terceiro Mundo na política externa chinesa no século XXI e as transformações politicas e estrategicas que daí decorrerem para a governança global.

Palavras-Chave: Nova Política Externa Chinesa — *Soft Power* — Terceiro Mundo - governança global

1. Tiananmen crisis and the materialization of a new foreign policy

Under Mao's rule, Chinese foreign policy was shaped by revolutionary fervour directed against the two superpowers, an active courtship of Third World countries whilst keeping a safe distance from international organisations, and economically very inward looking. In his quest for modernisation, Deng Xiaoping inverted this picture by abandoning its subversive revolutionary policies in the Third World and gradually mending relations with world super-powers. This was complemented bya moderate engagement with the international community targeting in particular financial organizations looking for rights and privileges that could benefit China's economic reforms and make it more attractive for investors.[1] Moreover, in sharp contrast with Mao's era, China's foreign policy decision making under Deng gradually became a collective exercise, although still highly centralized.

In the early 1990's Chinese foreign policy was forced to adjust to domestic and international events. The trigger for that change was the diplomatic isolation China was subject to following the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, which was further bolstered by Soviet Union's collapse as it positioned China as the remaining large communist state (Alden & Alves, 2008, p. 53). Facing the unwanted perspective of becoming a pariah in the post-Cold War world, China launched an 'omni-directional diplomacy' (*zhoubian*, meaning 'circumference') (Hsiung, 1995, pp. 573-586) in an attempt to realign its international relations so as to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the developed world. The new diplomatic offensive encompassed dispatching Chinese officials on goodwill missions' worldwide, promoting visits to China by foreign leaders, normalising relations with as many countries as possible irrespective of their ideological allegiance and moving closer to the Third World countries within international institutions (Alden & Alves, 2008, p. 53). This initiative served also to promote China's perception of what the new world order should be like: effective equality among countries, a multi-polar world to counterbalance US' hegemony, and that a new

[1] In the 1980's China became member of International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and in 1986 it applied to resume its position in GATT as a founding member.

economic order, more just to developing countries, should come into existence.

This diplomatic offensive was matched by a revolutionary economic package designed to speed up the pace of economic reforms and opening up to the outside world, which was critical in overcoming Western political discomfort. Moreover, in 1992 China confirmed the goal of becoming a socialist market economy aiming at becoming a founding member of the WTO in 1995. Chinese foreign policy became thus increasingly entangled with domestic economic priorities.

Another factor of change in China's foreign policy orientation was a further compulsion to institutionalise and decentralise the decision making process (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003, pp. 29-31) "... not only do government departments in foreign, economic, and military affairs provide information and suggestions to the top decision makers... but top leaders also give more attention to the opinions of scholars and specialists." (Zhang Baijia, 2004, pp. 61-81)

2. Bilateralism and multilateralism in the new Chinese foreign policy

One of the most notorious shifts that China's foreign policy underwent in the 1990s, especially in the second half, was China's changing attitude towards multilateralism. Beijing gradually stopped seeing it as a mere restraining instrument of Western powers to perceive it as an opportunity to promote its interests and improve its image as a responsible power and as a means to reach out to non-traditional regions. China's successful new diplomacy was thus, from then on, synchronised with its grand strategy "... to engineer the country's rise to the status of a true great power that shapes, rather than simply responds to, the international system"(Goldstein, 2001, p. 836). During this period China approached its neighbours to settle disputes and normalise relations in order to promote economic cooperation[2] and it also engaged in several multilateral mechanisms mostly in Asia, but also in outer regions.[3] In addition, China joined several major conventions (arms' control, non-proliferation) and increased its

[2] Namely with India, Russia and Mongolia.

[3] In 1995 it helped to create the ASEAN+3 mechanism and established ASEAN-China dialogue; in 1996 launched the basis for the first multilateral forum in Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; in the same year China became a founding member of the Asia-Europe Meeting, and two years later started a annual political dialogue with the EU; ASEAN Regional Forum and APEC are also among the multilateral initiatives that Beijing joined.

participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

By the dawn of the 21st century, Chinese foreign policy had clearly replaced the long lasting victimisation approach (*shouhaizhe xintai* - the long term shame and humiliation discourse) by an increasing great power mentality (*daguo xintai*). (Medeiros & Fravel, 2001, p. 32)Indeed, the late 1990s and the early years of the new century were prolific in events that helped eradicate China's feeling of humiliation and frustration, a process initiated in 1971 with the admission to the U.N.. These events were, namely, Hong Kong and Macao's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and 1999, respectively, its accession to W.T.O. and winning the bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, both in 2001. This new scenario nourished a growing feeling of pride among Chinese citizens and nationalism naturally emerged as a strong element not only in the legitimation of China's Communist Party's hold on power but also as a sound base for its rising power foreign policy.[4]

"In this process China has developed from first seeking unilateral advantage from ... international institutions towards playing an increasing participatory role in multilateral international organizations and in the promotion of its own ideas for international norms and regimes" (Yahuda, 1999, p. 653).

China's growing engagement with multilateral organisations does not necessarily mean that it has internalised the dominant norms of the international system. China's commitment to these norms is limited by the principles that guide its relations with the developing countries, namely, respect for state sovereignty, respect for diversity, equity, a more just international economic order and preference for informal consultation and consensus building. Therefore, its growing engagement with multilateralism might be more a consequence of the system structure than a true socialisation into its normative underpinnings (Wang, 2003, pp. 475-491). In fact, China's current relations with the developing world might be the clue to prove that Beijing's move towards multilateralism is perceived by its leaders as a mere complement to bilateral dealings, which remain, undoubtedly, China's preferred diplomacy formula.

[4] For a detailed analysis on Chinese nationalism impact on its rising path see: Chris Hughes, Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era, London: Routledge, 2006.

3. **China's Third World policy: patterns of interaction and present revival**

China's Third World policy was originally developed by Mao, dating back to the early years of the People's Republic of China. Two aims were then behind its formulation: uniting the Third World against the super powers (U.S. and Soviet Union) and to organise and mobilise the Third World to form a new international order (Yu, 1977, p. 1036). The 'five principles of peaceful coexistence' (mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, Mutual nonaggression, Mutual non-interference in internal affairs, Equality and mutual benefit),[5] were then casted as the foundations of China's Third World policy.

Despite being a constant element in China's foreign policy since 1949, Beijing's policy towards the Third World went through several different phases influenced by both domestic leadership and the international structure.

The 1950's mark the genesis of Chinese Third World policy deeply influenced by the quest for diplomatic recognition among other nations, especially its newly independent neighbours. The launching of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and China's participation in the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung in 1955 were the first pillars of this new policy. By this time China was a close ally of the Soviet Union and, its primary interest then was to oppose the US. As the decade came to an end, relations with Moscow deteriorated along the ideological rift. The sino-soviet split further reinforced Beijing's Third World Policy. In face of soviet revisionism, Mao adapted its 'two worlds theory' into a 'three worlds theory', one leaded by the U.S., and the Soviet Union, another by Europe and other developed countries, and a third one aside the first two, mostly composed by developing countries of the three A's (Asia, Africa and Latina-America), that refused to align with either blocks, and with which China believed to share its peaceful coexistence principles, anti-hegemonic stance and a pledge for a new economic world order.

In the 1960's, China's Third World policy became more aggressive, especially in Asia and Africa, opposing the two superpowers and encouraging revolution of the

[5] These principles were expounded in the first National People's Congress in September 1949 and then again in the proclamation ceremony of the founding of the PRC the following month. They were applied on first hand to resume relations with India and Burma in 1954. The five principles were also one of the main contributions of China to Bandung's conference in 1955.

'rural areas of the world' against the 'cities', though with little success. The Cultural Revolution's advent in 1966 temporarily suspended China's subversive incursions abroad.

In late 60's and early 70s the increased perception of the Soviet menace led to a rapprochement towards the US that culminated with the seizure of UN's seat at Security Council in 1971 followed by the gradual diplomatic recognition by most states in the world. Even though China's re-admission into the international community positioned China to have a more active role in world affairs and make the best out of its relations with the Third World, this endeavour was postponed for another two decades as the economic reforms and modernisation process initiated in 1978 took precedence. .

Nevertheless, references to the Third World continued to permeate China's foreign policy discourse. In 1981 China launched an 'independent policy' (Smith, 1986, pp. 59-61), distancing itself from Mao's ideology/revolutionary approach whilst reassuring other Maoist contributions such as the Three Worlds Theory and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Despite closer to the Third World in its rhetoric, this new Chinese foreign policy did not, however, translate into concrete actions. In practice China was more actively engaged in deepening its relations with the developed world, seen as more crucial to its quest for modernisation.

In 1996, the Taiwan missile crisis once again raised isolation fears in Beijing and again the Third World materialized s an important supporting platform for China. Jiang Zemin and Li Peng's Africa-Asia tours in 1996 and 1997,[6] respectively, marked a preparatory stage for the revival of the Third World in China's foreign policy at the dawn of the 21st century. In fact, it was during that trip that the idea of creating a sino-African dialogue platform was vented for the first time. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) met for the first time four years later in Beijing.[7] The fourth leadership generation that took over in 2002 under the Aegis of Hu Jintao further committed to the revitalisation of the Third World dimension in China's foreign policy. This has come to fruition in the forma surge in diplomatic missions' exchanges,

[6] These tours took place in the context of the Taiwan crisis and while a resolution on China's human rights situation was being voted at the Human Rights Commission.

[7] The Forum meets every three years at the level of head of states. Alternating between Beijing and an African capital. There have been 6 summits, so far with the next one planned for 2018 in Beijing.

especially with Latin America and Africa, since the early 2000's,[8] as well as by the rapid growth in trade and financial flows with these regions. This same level of commitment has been maintained under Xi Jinping's rule, evidenced by the inclusion of Africa in the Belt and Road initiative and the announcement of another USD $60 billion in loans to Africa in the last FOCAC summit that took place in Johannesburg in 2015.

Two main interaction patterns become evident in this analysis. First, Chinese foreign policy towards the Third World has gradually moved from confrontation (revolution) to de facto peaceful coexistence and cooperation, as ideology gave place to economic pragmatism and China became more integrated in the world. Second, up until the turn of the century China's Third World Policy was clearly a function, not an independent variable, of Beijing's relations with the super powers (US & Soviet Union), in the words of Peter Van Ness: "In the end, PRC foreign policy is shaped by its relations with the most powerful states in the global system."(Van Ness, 1998, p. 164)

However, in the beginning of the 21st century Beijing's motivation to a closer association with the Third World seems not to be so dependent of its relations with the remaining power, the U.S., or the system structure. This time, domestic reasons seem to be the major stimulus, namely, the urge to find new markets to drain its manufactures oversupply and also diversify and find new sources of energy and food upon which depends its continued economic growth and, hence, its political stability and rise to great power status at the world stage.

4. China's Third World policy as a source of soft power

Evidently, a closer relationship with these regions also plays to its benefit as developing countries represent 2/3 of voting countries at the U.N., signifying a major soft power asset for China, especially if one thinks of it in the context of China's growing involvement in multilateral fora. As George T. Yu noted, back in the 1950's when its Third World policy was formulated and most of these countries were still fighting for independence, China could not foresee the full potential of this force but it "...did seize upon new developments, identified with new causes, recognized their signi-

[8] The most famous are Hu Jintao's Latin America tour in 2004 and Africa tour early in 2007.

ficance and incorporated the trends as part of its international strategy."(Yu, 1977, p. 1048) This political capital granted mainland China the UN Security Council seat in 1971. This soft power over developing countries has never been as strong as in the present time, deriving now mostly from the boom in bilateral trade flows and economic cooperation. The economic investment paid off in political dividends soon enough with China being elected in 2006 for the newly created U.N Human Rights Council despite Beijing's controversial record on the issue.

Soft power, as defined by its theoriser Joseph Nye, emerges when "A country ... obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness — want to follow it." (Nye, 2004, p. 5) Soft power rests thus on the "...ability to shape the preferences of others". (Nye, 2004, p. 5) It is not the same as influence (as this can be achieved through hard power) and it is more than persuasion or to move others by argument. It is more the ability to attract through shared values and, by persuading others of the validity to contribute to these values, making them want what you want. It has to do with the "attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices..." (Nye, 2004, p. 7). According to Nye, there are three sources of soft power: culture (when it is attractive to others), political values (when they are coherence, domestically and abroad) and foreign policy (when seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2004, p. 10). Although interesting, it is beyond the scope of this article to assess the strength of Chinese Culture, political values and foreign policy as sources of soft power. The interest of this debate derives from its corollary assumption: that China's values have legitimate universal aspirations (the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, multi-polar world...), and thus these values have the power to attract others and so enable China to obtain its desired outcomes.

Moreover, the sharp contrast in the new century between China and the U.S. behaviours in world affairs further plays to China's advantage in terms of soft power as it increasingly stands out as a peaceful power and a development agent. Indeed, Beijing's successful development through a hybrid solution ('market socialism') is appealing to many developing countries in the Southern hemisphere, especially in Africa where numerous autocratic regimes are still in place.

As Joseph Nye stresses, the effectiveness of soft power "depends more than hard

power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers." (Nye, 2004, p. 16).

The way China is perceived in the developing world varies, however, across regions (Manning, 1986, pp. 139-154).[9] In general terms, and despite the close economic, historical and cultural ties, China is regarded with some scepticism in Southeast Asia due to several reasons. First, due to the wide presence of ethnic Chinese minorities which control a significant part of these countries' economies; second, because of Beijing's past support to local communist parties; and third, China is regarded as an economic competitor as most of them are also export-led economies, and also China is perceived as a regional power acting on self-interest. Nevertheless, trade volume between China and ASEAN countries more than doubles that of Latin America or Africa, and multilateral engagement has been increasing (Free Trade Agreement entered in place in 2015). From China's perspective this is undoubtedly the most important of the three developing regions because of its geographic proximity, the high potential but also the challenges that derive from this relationship.

In Africa, China is, in general, regarded as a source of inspiration: a poor backward country that succeeded in developing its economy and achieving genuine economic independence. Africa works for China much as a show case to promote its credentials as a peaceful development agent and a reliable south-south cooperation partner. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, China wisely quit expensive political and military support to concentrate in small scale cooperation projects (technical assistance, health, education...) and official missions' exchanges (Zhao Ziyang visited 11 countries in 1982-83). After FOCAC's creation in 2000 China's economic involvement in Africa rose exponentially and so did their respective importance to one another.

Latin America, on the other hand, was until recently the least important region of the three for China as indifference characterised mutual relations throughout much of P.R.C.'s existence due to geographic distance and traditional U.S. influence in the area. Until recently Latin America (LA) had a scant knowledge and a lack of interest in China, which meant that there were no hard feelings restraining relations when China started approaching the region in the late 1990's. China's fresh interest in the area stems from three main reasons. First, most of the countries that still recognise Taiwan are located in LA; second, its large reserves of raw materials (iron ore, copper and oil); and

[9] The views expressed ahead are adapted from Manning, 1986, pp. 139-154.

third, potential strategic political allies among the local emerging countries (i.e. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina).

Notwithstanding the potential for competition and friction to increase with these regions in the years to come, especially in LA and Asia, China's unyielding support for third world causes (the foundation of its soft power) might continue to instil much trust and reliability in its foreign policy no matter how self-serving it might also be.

Conclusion

The Third World has been an important and constant element in Beijing's foreign policy since the founding of the PRC, part of its wider stance to oppose hegemonism and promote a new economic order. The fact that China arrived in the 21st century empowered by its economic growth emphasised even further this policy orientation, for both domestic economic and international political reasons.

China's growing leverage over the Third world in the 21st century, be it through increased economic reliance or stronger soft power, has potential to cause significant shifts in the current international system structure and its normative underpinnings. With regards to its economic engagement, China's preferred practices seem to differ significantly in many respects from the neo-liberal paradigm (namely its no-conditionalities policy vs Washington Consensus) and its attractiveness to these regions may well lead to a shift in local preferences for the Chinese cooperation model. As to China's growing soft power over the developing world, the consequences might be even more far reaching particularly in the context of a weakening US leadership. China's increasing leverage over developing countries (that hold the majority of membership in multilateral fora) may enable China to gradually reshape the rules and norms from within, ultimately leading to a more sinocentric world order.

Bibliography

Alden, Chris and Alves, Ana Cristina (2008) "History and Identity in the Construction of China's Africa Policy", in: *Review of African Political Economy,* Vol 35, No. 115, pp. 43-58

Goldstein, Avery “The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy: A Rising Power’s Emerging Choice”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 168, December 2001

Hsiung, James C. “China's Omni-directional Diplomacy: Realignment to Cope with Monopolar U.S. Power”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No 6, June 1995

Hughes, Chris, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era*, London: Routledge, 2006.

Manning, Robert “The Third World Looks at China”, in: Lilian Harris & Robert L. Worden, (Ed.s). *China and the Third World: Champion or Challenger*, London & Sidney: Croom Helm Limited, 1986

Medeiros, Evan S. and Fravel, M. Taylor “China’s New Diplomacy”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 6, November/December 2003

Nye, Joseph, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, NY: Public Affairs, 2004

Smith, Sarah-Ann “China’s Third World Policy as a Counterpoint to the First and Second Worlds”, in: Lilian C. Harris & Robert L. Worden (Ed.s). *China and the Third World: Champion or Challenger*, London & Sidney: Croom Helm Limited, 1986

Van Ness, Peter “China and the Third World: Patterns of Engagement and Indifference”, in: Samuel S. Kim (Ed.), *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy faces the New Millenium*, Boulder-Colorado & Oxford: Westview Press, 1998, p. 164.

Wang, Hongying “Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: The Limits of Socialization”, in: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2003

Yahuda, Michael “China’s Foreign Relations: the Long March, Future Uncertain", *The China Quarterly*, No. 159, September 1999

Yu, George T. “China and the Third World”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 11, November 1977

Zhang Baijia, “Chinese Domestic and Foreign Policies in the 1990s” in: Ezra S. Vogel et al (eds), *The age of Uncertainty: the U.S.-Japan-China Triangle, from Tiananmen (1989) to 9/11 (2001)*, Harvard University Asia Centre, Cambridge & Massachusetts, 2004 (Harvard East Asian Monographs online);