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International Status: China’s Pursuit of a Comprehensive Superpower Status

Mingjiang Li

For scholars of China’s international relations, the crucial question that has been asked and debated frequently is this: what essentially drives China’s international behavior? Over the past decades, observers have proffered a wide variety of explanations. Some argue that China’s international policy has been largely motivated by the pursuit of power and other national interests and there is essentially no difference between China and many other nations in this regard (Mearsheimer 2001). Others argue that domestic politics in China are also significant in engendering foreign policy outcomes (Shirk 2007; Swaine 1995; Fravel 2005; Gill and Medeiros 2000; Li 2008a, 2009a). Still others argue that China is unique in that its culture has had an important impact on its foreign policy. Many scholars in this school of thought are inclined to believe that China’s Confucian culture has served as the intellectual backdrop for China’s decision-makers and has led to notably different foreign and security policy patterns in the case of China as compared with many other countries (Feng 2007). In relation to culture, some analysts argue that the history of China’s encounters with the outside world, particularly its neighborhood, is also an important factor in understanding China’s international behavior (Kang 2003). However, it is important to note that there are different views on the cultural influence on China’s international relations (Johnston 1995).

A minority group of scholars have argued that, in addition to all those factors, it may be worthwhile to examine China’s concern over its international status as a driving force in China’s foreign relations (Deng 2008). This chapter follows this line of thought and attempts to ascertain how the pursuit of international status has influenced China’s foreign policy. The first section explains the Chinese understanding of international status. An analysis of the Chinese discourse on international status reveals that China is interested in pursuing an ultimately
comprehensive superpower status in the world. I argue that this pursuit is part of China’s grand strategy. The second section examines China’s major approaches to raising its international standing. The third section analyzes some of the major constraints for China’s pursuit of international status. I conclude that China has made progress in upgrading its international status, but there are also significant constraints for China to move further. A reluctance to shoulder more international responsibilities and China’s domestic political system seem to be the major hurdles for the further improvement of China’s international status.

The China Dream:
The Pursuit of a Comprehensive Superpower Status

The Chinese elite are very sensitive to and keen on the pursuit of international status for their nation. The strong Chinese interest in international status comes from a combination of cultural, historical, social, and contemporary political sources. The Chinese frequently boast of the continuation of their 5000 years of civilization and their past glory. From an early age, Chinese students are told that for a long time their nation used to be the most powerful nation in Asia and in the world, and that the “Middle Kingdom” used to enjoy a predominant role in East Asia and was admired by peoples in other parts of the world. Almost any Chinese with a few years of schooling would proudly discuss the four great inventions of ancient China and their contribution to human civilization, namely the compass, gunpowder, paper-making, and printing, to a foreign audience. An average Chinese would also proudly talk about the fact that the Chinese empire used to be the most powerful nation in Asia and that many neighboring countries paid tribute to the “Middle Kingdom.”

One explanation for the Chinese elite’s particular enthusiasm for the restoration of their international status is perhaps the sharp contrast between China’s past glory and their experience of being invaded and humiliated by the Western powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Chinese history textbooks carry a strong message for the Chinese students that being weak invites bullying by other powerful nations. It is this sharp contrast between the Chinese people’s collective social memory of China’s past great international status and the century of precipitous decline of international influence and humiliation that render the Chinese elite so obsessed with their nation’s international standing. One can argue that China’s history of half-century-long revolutions from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was, to a large extent, driven by the national aspiration of restoring China’s glorious past. The Chinese revolutionary leaders in the past century—Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong—all took advantage of this strong nationalistic sentiment among the public for their revolutionary causes. Since its assumption of power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always attributed its ruling position in China to the fact that it was able to get rid of Western imperialist incursions in China. To some extent, the political legitimacy of
the CCP still rests on its claim that it attempts to steer the Chinese people toward the restoration of China’s status in the world.

It is no surprise then that the term “international status” has frequently appeared in the rhetoric of political elite, major CCP documents, important government reports, and the writings of prominent Chinese scholars. Not only do such documents demonstrate the importance of the pursuit of international status in the Chinese thinking, but they also provide us with an insight of what the Chinese mean when they talk about international status as a pursuit in China’s foreign policy.

Former Chinese leader Jiang Zeming (1992), in the work report at the 14th Party Congress, concluded that China’s international influence and status had witnessed a considerable expansion and rise since 1987. He cited some of the major achievements in China’s foreign relations to support his conclusion: China’s relations with its neighboring countries were at the best ever period since the founding of the PRC; China’s solidarity and co-operation with the developing world had been further consolidated and strengthened; China’s relations with other countries including the Western developed countries continued to develop and improve. At the 15th Party Congress, Jiang (1997) noted that China resolutely implemented its independent foreign policy of peace and further improved the external environment for China’s reforms and opening up. Consequently, China’s international influence had further expanded. At the 16th Party Congress, Jiang (2002) concluded in the work report that China, in accordance with the developments and changes in the international situation, adopted correct foreign policy guidelines and policies, extensively carried out bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, actively participated in international exchanges and co-operation and, as a result, China’s international status had further risen.

Premier Wen Jiabao (2008) stated at the first annual meeting of the 11th National People’s Congress that, in the past five years, China had made great progress in economic growth, scientific development and innovation, foreign reserve accumulation, governance reforms, and improvement of people’s living standards. All these contributed to the “continuous improvement” of China’s international status and international influence. At the fourth session of the 11th National People’s Congress, Wen (2011) re-emphasized that economic development, scientific breakthroughs, and improvement in people’s lives have all contributed to the growth of China’s international status. He pointed out that, during the period of China’s 11th Five-Year Plan (2006–2010), “China’s international status and influence has significantly risen. We played an important and constructive role in international affairs, effectively protected our national sovereignty, security, and development interests. China’s all-round diplomacy has made major progress.” He also mentioned China’s successful hosting of two major events—the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo—that contributed significantly to the elevation of China’s international status.

Among the scholarly community in China, there is a strong interest in discussing and analyzing China’s international status. The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, for instance, has been publishing an annual report on the state of China’s
international status since 2003. The mainstream view in China seems to indicate that sources of hard power, economic and military might, are the most important indicators of a nation’s international status. Chinese analysts frequently cite various economic data, such as economic growth rate, total GDP, foreign reserve, projected economic growth, and the reduced gap between China’s economic power and that of the USA, to gauge China’s international status (Chu et al. 2009; Zheng and Guo 2009). Huang Renwei (2009), a Chinese scholar who discusses China’s international status largely in terms of economic power, notes that in 1820 China’s economy accounted for 25 percent of the world total. In approximately a decade from now, China may be able to account for the same percentage of the world economy. By then, a full cycle of China’s international status will have been completed. In addition to total economic power, some analysts argue that China’s international status has risen also because it has been able to make a larger contribution to world economic growth, world trade growth, and global investment. It is pointed out that, from 2000 to 2009, on average, China’s contribution to world economic growth reached 0.51 percent, higher than that of the Euro-region and Japan but lower than that of the USA. In particular, during 2007–2009, China’s contribution to world economic growth reached 0.67 percent (Wu 2010).

In the Chinese discourse, there are also other indicators for international status. One frequently mentioned indicator is China’s increasing involvement in solving global problems: the reform of the international financial system, the United Nations peace-keeping operations, counter-terrorism, climate change, energy security, international aid programs, nonproliferation, and counter-piracy. It is believed that the emergence of the G20, particularly the possibility of the G20 replacing the G8, signifies the increased role of China in global governance and the rising status of China in the international system (Y. Wang 2010). Other Chinese scholars have argued that the Chinese culture may facilitate the rise of China’s international status. For instance, it has been argued that China’s cultural emphasis on “seeking harmony without suppressing differences” (he er bu tong) may hold some appeal in international relations, thus helping China upgrade its international influence and status (Li 2006). Although China possesses abundant cultural resources, others have argued that its cultural soft power influence in the world is still weak, far lagging behind its economic and political status in the international arena (Liu and Tang 2010). Some analysts in China believe that the increasing influence of the Chinese model of development has also contributed to the upgrading of China’s international status (Y. Wang 2010).

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, there is a notable sense of euphoria in China that China’s international status has been significantly raised. Former Chinese ambassador Wu Jianmin (2009), now a prominent foreign affairs commentator, notes that 2008 was the year when China’s international status and influence experienced the most notable expansion. China began to move from the periphery to the centre of the world political stage. Chu Shulong (2009), a renowned International Relations (IR) scholar from Tsinghua University, observes that the growth of China’s economic power, achievements in military modernization, and scientific and technological prowess have all contributed to the rise of China’s
international status. At the same time, the status of many Western countries has declined. Other emerging powers, such as Russia, Brazil, and India, cannot match the economic growth of China. He also mentions that China’s “peaceful development” strategy or official rhetoric has gained wider acceptance in many other countries and contributed to the growth of China’s international status. Jin Canrong (2010), a well-known Chinese IR scholar at Renmin University, believes that the global financial crisis in 2008/2009 has provided an excellent opportunity for China’s international status. In his understanding, the financial crisis has significantly weakened the US predominant position in the world but has raised the expectation in the rest of the world for China to play a more influential role in dealing with various international problems. He specifically argues that the financial crisis has made it possible for China to surpass Japan in terms of total GDP five years ahead of many predictions. He concludes that the relative power relations in the world, China’s economic development, and the expectation of outside world for China to play a larger role in international affairs all essentially mean that China has raised its international status significantly. Some analysts believe that the year 2008 was significant also because the Beijing Olympics in 2008 contributed to the growth of China’s international status (Yang 2006).

The Chinese elite are not oblivious to some of the major obstacles to the further elevation of China’s international standing. Chu (2009) acknowledges that, owing to differences with the Western world in terms of ideology, values, and socio-political system, China’s image in the mainstream Western media is still quite negative and this does not bode well for China’s international status. Huang (2009) concedes that, in the coming decades, China will face both opportunities and difficulties in its quest for higher international status. He believes that many of the obstacles arise from China’s domestic development and political structure. As China becomes more important in international affairs, Wu (2009) also notes that it will have to consider how to contribute more to the common interests of the whole world. Judging from all the official discourse, including the contexts in which the official views are enunciated and the views from prominent Chinese scholars, it is quite plausible to believe that China is essentially interested in the quest for a superpower status with comprehensive power in the economic, military, political, and cultural arenas. By all accounts, it seems clear that the Chinese understanding of international status is closely related to the combination of the growth of its hard power and the success of its foreign policy. The former includes economic and military power that attracts the admiration of other countries while the latter helps the rest of the world to see China in a positive light and facilitates the expansion of China’s decision-making power and influence in world affairs. One could argue that the pursuit of a comprehensive superpower status in the world has been the most important element in strategic thinking of the Chinese elite in the past decades. The pursuit of a comprehensive superpower status has been and is likely to continue to be China’s grand strategic goal.
China’s Approaches to Raising its International Status

Since the founding of the PRC, Beijing has regarded the elevation of China’s international standing an essential strategic objective. Chinese leaders have attempted to achieve this goal by developing its domestic economy on the one hand and trying to play a bigger role in international politics on the other. During Mao’s era, the Party-government constantly hoped to accelerate the socio-economic development. The chosen path was socialism and, to a large extent, it was modeled on Stalinist visions. Mao and his colleagues took drastic measures such as the Great Leap Forward in order to transform China’s socio-economic reality within the shortest possible time. For many reasons, including the top leaders’ major policy blunders, domestic political strife, and external factors, Mao’s China was not successful in building a strong material foundation for China to expand its international influence.

Also, internationally, China was much constrained by two major factors: the Cold War international structure and the domestic socio-political revolution. In a bi-polar world that was divided by ideological differences, China suffered largely from political isolation. It had very few contacts with the Western world and very little presence in various international organizations as well. Mao and his colleagues were keen to push for revolution throughout the world as a means to upgrade China’s international status. The impulse was so strong that Beijing even engaged in a power struggle with its political mentor, the former Soviet Union (Radchenko 2009). China also devoted substantial resources to engaging with the Third World, especially African countries, through its ideological appeal and material assistance programs in order to play a more noticeable role in international affairs. Overall, ideological and political confrontation with the West was believed to be an approach to raising China’s international status. During Mao’s generation, China made some progress in raising its international status through its revolutionary struggles against the West and Western imperialism, the propagation of its ideological influence and political support to leftist movements in the Third World, its political campaigns in support of decolonization and solidarity with the developing world, its resolve to participate in the Korean War and Vietnam War against predominant American military power, as well as the successful development of China’s nuclear program.

The breakthrough came when China and the USA began the rapprochement process in the early 1970s. The improvement of relations with Washington and Beijing’s accession into the United Nations thawed China’s diplomatic isolation and Beijing began to participate broadly in various international organizations. However, overall, it is hard to conclude that Mao and his cohorts succeeded in dramatically raising China’s international status at this point in time. China was still a very poor country and its international standing was very weak at the time of Mao’s demise in 1976.

China’s international status began to substantially improve after Deng Xiaoping started the reform and opening up program in the late 1970s. Domestic economic reforms liberated China’s productivity. China’s economy began to take
off. In the past three decades, China’s economy has grown at a rate of close to 41 percent per annum. The dramatic economic growth has been really the most important factor in boosting China’s international prestige in the last decades of the twentieth century. However, the domestic reform program also necessitated China participating more broadly in international affairs. China’s participation in international organizations increased during the 1980s and Chinese policymakers embarked on a dramatic adjustment of China’s foreign policy. With “Peace and Development” as the theme and objectives in China’s international strategy, Chinese foreign policy became more moderate and more engaging, hence rapidly boosting China’s international status.

A major blow to the positive trajectory of China’s international standing came in 1989 when the government forcefully suppressed the Tiananmen demonstration. In the early years of the 1990s, China faced quite daunting diplomatic challenges. Almost all Western powers imposed serious economic and other sanctions on it. As the mainstream international opinion was very critical of China, it was several years before Chinese leaders revived its international activism. With its economy again growing at a phenomenal rate, China became even more proactive in shaping and transforming the international system to its advantage. In the mid-1990s, China began to seriously push for the multipolarization of the international structure, advocate democratization in international decision-making, consolidate unity with the developing world, dramatically improve relations with its neighbors, and establish various strategic partnerships with other major countries or blocks of countries, most significantly with Russia, in order to soft-balance the only superpower—the USA (Paul 2005).

A noteworthy area is China’s participation in multilateralism, both at the regional level in Asia and at the global level. Beijing believes that active participation in various multilateral settings helps to improve China’s international image and international standing by diminishing fears of the “China threat” thesis and building a “responsible power” image for China (Lu 2008). China now participates actively in almost all multilateral conventions and institutions of the United Nations and other multilateral regimes in various functional areas. China has also engaged other parts of the world multilaterally, although some of these engagements are fairly loose and even merely symbolic in nature. China has participated in and also hosted the Asia-Europe Meeting since its inception in 1996. The China–EU Summit has become a regular multilateral consultation mechanism between China and European countries. At the initiation of and with support from China, the Sino-African Cooperation Forum has become well institutionalized. In Latin America, China has forged regular dialogue relations with the Rio Group, the Southern Common Market, and the Andean Community. In Central Asia, China plays an important role in steering the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China’s involvement in multilateralism is even more notable in East Asia (Li 2009b). China is a regular participant in various regional institutions and forums, such as “10 + 1” (ASEAN plus China), “10 + 3” (ASEAN plus Three—China, Japan and South Korea), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia-
Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Six-Party Talks on North Korea, and the emerging China–Japan–South Korea trilateral co-operation.

Beijing also believes that multilateralism is advantageous for upgrading China’s international status because it is conducive for accelerating the formation of a multipolar world that will eventually weaken American hegemony in world affairs. China regards participation in multilateralism, particularly through cooperation and co-ordination with other emerging powers, as a useful means to achieve other tangible goals, including pushing for a more equitable and fairer international political and economic order, striving for a larger share of decision-making power in various international institutions, especially in the economic and financial institutions (the World Bank and IMF), and boosting its international influence (Guo 2010). Consequently, China’s international standing will be significantly boosted if China becomes one of the poles in the world and enjoys larger decision-making power in international affairs.

The mainstream Chinese elite have also realized that soft power should be another important factor that China will have to take into serious consideration in order to raise China’s international status (Li 2008b). Chinese strategists have frequently argued that soft power has to be part of “comprehensive power” that a major nation is expected to possess. In addition, soft power has become an important indicator of a state’s international status and influence (Men 2007). Party chief and President Hu Jintao made it clear at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting on January 4, 2006 that “[the] increase in our nation’s international status and influence will have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology, and defence, as well as in soft power such as culture” (Ma 2007). This emphasis on soft power was reiterated by Hu. In his political report to the 17th Party Congress in October 2007, he stressed the urgency of strenuously building China’s cultural soft power to meet domestic needs and increasing international competition.

China regards soft power as an important tool to improve China’s image in the international arena. The Chinese elite believe that soft power can help dispel what they see as misperception or misunderstanding of the real China by foreign commentators. The aim is two-fold: to develop a better image of the Chinese regime in the world and also to fend off excessive penetration of foreign cultures into China, particularly those ideologies or beliefs that undermine the legitimacy of the ruling party. Soft power can also play a role in refuting the “China threat” theory, thus facilitating a better understanding of China’s domestic socio-economic reality and persuading the world at large to accept and support China’s rise (Fang 2007).

Not surprisingly, China has made tremendous efforts in promoting its soft power influence throughout the world in the past decade. These efforts range from sponsoring hundreds of Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classes throughout the world, to hosting numerous Chinese cultural programs in many countries, and investing substantial amounts of money in state-owned media organizations. These measures were designed to increase China’s media influence in the world and advocate “peace” and “harmony” in international relations (Li 2009c). However, even after much effort has been made, the mainstream view in China
International Status

is that soft power remains a weak link in China’s international strategy. Many Chinese elite believe that China’s soft power has lagged far behind its own hard power capabilities and is inferior compared with the soft power influence of other major powers, particularly that of the USA. They argue that this disparity dampens China’s aspiration for higher international status and greater international influence (J. Wang 2007a). It is highly probable that China will continue to intensify its soft power strategy in its international relations in the decades to come, with the sole purpose of cultivating a higher international status for the Chinese nation.

Undoubtedly, China continually seeks to upgrade its international status by focusing on developing its “comprehensive national power.” No effort will be spared in pushing for its modernization programs, concentrating on economic development, and making enormous efforts in its military build-up in the coming decades. Many Chinese seem to be quite optimistic about the long-term prospects of their nation’s superpower status. One Chinese study concludes that China is likely to catch up with the USA in terms of total GDP sometime between 2026 and 2045. To be a superpower, according to some Chinese analysts, a nation has to be strong in at least three out of the four areas of global influence—economic, military, political, and cultural power, so China seems to be moving in the direction of becoming a superpower (Chu et al 2009).

The Dilemmas for China:
Responsibilities, Values, and Domestic Governance

It is commonly believed that a willingness to shoulder more international responsibilities is an attribute of higher international status. China is certainly aware that a major power in the world has to be able to provide some form of international public goods for the entire international society. Chinese leaders have noted on numerous occasions that China will be willing to shoulder more international responsibilities as its capabilities continue to grow. Chinese strategists have also contended that China will have to provide more international public goods if it expects to be perceived as a global leader. Yet, in reality, there is a strong sense of reluctance on the part of China to provide more resources in dealing with challenging global problems, such as climate change.

China’s hesitation to move to the next stage of its international leadership position is evident in its responses to some of the major proposals that have called on China to take on more international responsibilities. China has kept a close watch over some of the newly emerging proposals regarding “major responsible power,” “Chimerica,” “G2,” and “Sino-US co-governance” with much interest. However, the official line, as expounded by Premier Wen Jiabao (2009) during his European trip in May 2009, is that Beijing does not agree with such proposals. In Wen’s words, “These proposals are groundless and thus wrong.” The grounds for China’s negative reaction to these proposals rest on the fact that Beijing has always regarded itself as a developing country. Premier Wen Jiabao (2007a) clearly stated
that, although China has made tremendous progress in economic development and improving people’s lives, it “currently remains and will remain for a long time at the primary stage of socialism.”

Some Chinese scholars found merit in the international discussion and efforts urging China to become a “responsible power” and indeed agree that China should strive to be a “responsible power” to boost its international standing. However, at the official level, there has never been any interest in positively responding to this proposal. In the mainstream Chinese discussion, the notion of a “responsible power” is simply a trap for China. The Chinese decision-makers are concerned that, if they accepted this concept, it would mean that they agreed that China had never been a “responsible power” or at least had failed to meet some major criteria of being a “responsible power.” This would denote that China has tacitly accepted Western biases and prejudices against it and ultimately render China in a disadvantageous position for international negotiations. More importantly, China believes that the real purpose of the American proposal of urging China to become a “responsible power” is to have China take on international responsibilities that only compromise with American national interests or moral standards that undermine Chinese interests and are thus unacceptable to China. The Chinese also fear that Western rhetoric of China becoming a “responsible power” may contain an implicit conspiracy of facilitating China’s transformation of its behavior, values, and domestic political system on the model of the USA and other Western powers. China believes that the G2 concept was an American conspiracy to nominally upgrade China’s international status but, in reality, to burden China with international responsibilities that are beyond its capability (Liu 2010).

China has now become part of the international system, but it does not have a clear blueprint for the role which it will attempt to play in various international institutions and regimes. In general, China has tried to refrain from playing any role that goes beyond that of a “participant” (Pang 2006a). The mainstream Chinese foreign policy community seems to believe that China has taken sufficient international responsibilities in various areas (Zhang and Huang 2008). However, in reality, China is largely the recipient of international public goods rather than being the provider. In many areas of global development, China’s contribution to the well-being of the international society has lagged far behind its own economic power, for instance, in global health issues. By 2005, the G8 and the EU had pledged a total of $130 billion in the global fight against HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria (Garrett and Alavian 2010). Yet China has been one of the top recipients of international health aid programs. It is the fourth largest recipient, after Ethiopia, India, and Tanzania, of the Global Fund, which is an institution set up by developed Western countries in 2002 to tackle global HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. International criticisms that China has been content to be a free-rider in the international system stems from the fact that China has yet to signal any interest in significantly increasing its financial contribution to global health assistance programs.

Another major obstacle for China’s pursuit of international status arises from the fact that there is a wide variance between China’s official values and the
global mainstream value system that is still dominated by Western powers. In its provision of development assistance programs, for instance, China does not care much about the political system, governance, and human rights situation in the receiving country. This is already well illustrated in China’s policy towards many African countries. In response to Western accusations of China’s unconditional aid programs to African and other developing countries, Beijing claims that it has been genuinely helping those countries to develop their economies. China’s counter-argument is that Western countries’ efforts in democratizing those countries have resulted in socio-political chaos and economic stagnation in many of the developing countries (Ding 2009). China’s assistance programs for many of the least developed countries may have contributed to the well-being of the local population in one way or another, but they have also indirectly helped to support the authoritarian regimes helming such countries. This, in turn, has invited vehement criticisms from Western countries and some of the liberal elite in those developing countries. As such, the above-mentioned obstacles have had a negative impact on China’s international standing.

China has a stringent position on sovereignty. It detests external interference in domestic affairs and resists humanitarian interventions. It is particularly opposed to the emerging Responsibility to Protect (R2P) concept. China’s opposition to these international norms is derived from its domestic politics. In China, the ruling position of the Chinese Communist Party has largely depended on the economic success that has provided material benefits for the vast majority of the Chinese people. However, the ruling elite are increasingly faced with many daunting challenges, such as growing income disparity, rampant corruption, and an emerging pluralistic society. Any endorsement of external interferences in domestic affairs would only invite stronger Western criticisms on China’s human rights violations, which the Chinese government is hard-pressed to prove otherwise. In recent years, the ruling elite in China have increasingly felt the challenges from the Chinese society. The single-party government has displayed little tolerance towards political challenges by Chinese human rights activists, political dissidents, and social critics with its use of a heavy-handed approach, as exemplified by the case of Liu Xiaobo (the Nobel Peace laureate) and the harsh crackdown on political activists in the aftermath of the “Jasmine Revolution” in the Middle East. While officials in charge of ideology, social order, and law enforcement may think that such harsh repression is warranted for China’s socio-political stability and continuation of the ruling power of the Party, international media reports of these incidents have sullied the positive international status that China is striving so hard to build.

Conclusion

While it is an understatement to say that all nation-states care about their international status, there is a stronger desire among the ruling elite in China to ensure that their nation ranks highly in the hierarchy of international order. In the
past decades, achieving a higher international status has been perhaps the most important aspect of China’s grand strategy. In the Chinese strategic thinking, there is nothing more important than for China to reach a prominent comprehensive superpower position in the world, and it seems that no price is too high to pay for the attainment of this national aspiration.

In the minds of the vast majority of Chinese people, particularly the elite, China is currently on the right track of moving towards a superpower position in the world. Its economy is growing at a rate that is unrivalled by any other major power. It is producing a middle class and a class of rich people that is unprecedented in human history. China today plays a fairly influential role in international affairs as a veto-wielding power in the United Nations Security Council, not only as a member of almost all international organizations and institutions, but also as an important participant in discussions dealing with various global issues such as trade, security, climate change, and development. Most importantly, China has risen to be a tangible challenger for the USA’s global predominance.

One can argue that the pursuit of higher international status has always been a strong pillar of Chinese nationalism. In both domestic politics and international politics, the Chinese ruling elite have proved to be highly effective in using the Chinese collective mindset for pursuing a more prominent position in the world for the Chinese nation. During both Mao’s revolutionary era and the reform era, Chinese political leaders were successful in drumbeating the slogan of reviving China’s international glory to mobilize socio-political support for various grand programs. The Chinese public is also very sensitive to the international perceptions of China. It is not uncommon for Chinese media to label foreign political and intellectual elite as either pro-China or anti-China. Foreign observers or commentators who praise China or show respect for China are often called “good friends of the Chinese people.” Those who are critical or even slightly critical of China are often labeled as “anti-China elements.” The vast majority of Chinese people strongly support their government’s policies towards the Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang issues. They agree with the official line that Western powers interfere in China’s internal affairs in order to split China and weaken China’s international status.

The analysis of this chapter also reveals that the Chinese grand strategy essentially does not distinguish between domestic affairs and external affairs. For the Chinese elite, domestic enhancement and foreign relations are inseparable. This is reflected in the policy pronouncements of the Chinese leaders, who in recent years have constantly emphasized the co-ordination between internal and external affairs. For instance, President Hu Jintao has emphatically instructed the foreign policy community to strive relentlessly to create a favorable external environment for domestic economic development. China has done a fairly good job in recent decades in this regard. Its foreign policy has served well the successful implementation of domestic reforms and opening up. In turn, the success of domestic economic development has brought more leverage for China in international affairs, resulting in the notable elevation of China’s international status. In the coming decades, China’s challenge lies in a switch of direction: how to appropriately divert its domestic material power to provide various international
public goods and how to address its domestic political problems while conforming to the mainstream international values and norms. Unless China makes serious major reforms in these two policy areas, its comprehensive superpower status is likely to remain in an unstable state.
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