China, ‘Global Challenges’ and the Complexities of International Cooperation

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Abstract
Several fundamental factors have led to China’s remarkable and significant progress in addressing much debated ‘global challenges’ and joining international community cooperation. Today, China is moving towards increasing universalism and reducing the overall significance of its particular concerns. With regard to the major global challenges the world faces – in the fields of economy, security, the environment, natural resources and public health – China’s stance is increasingly positive, with policies autonomously determined. Particularly remarkable are its responses to nuclear nonproliferation, transnational terrorism and climate change. It is right for China to refuse some quite unreasonable demands and pressure from the west; it is also right for it to play an increasing role in the international community, bearing its share of and responsibility for common global enterprises, as long as this is commensurate with its capabilities.

Addressing ‘global challenges’: China’s progress and complexity

This article will discuss China in the context of the oft-cited ‘global challenges’, mainly those in the fields of economy, security, environment and public health, which remain a focus of global debate due to the varying interests, situations and ways of thinking of different nations and peoples. In particular, the article will examine the past expressions, the present situation and the future prospects for China with regard to these important issues. What drives this evolution undoubtedly includes the following four fundamental factors that influence and reinforce each other: first, the rapid growth of China’s strengths and the vigorous rise of its international importance, and the consequent expansion and increase in its international responsibilities, which are matched by its enhanced capabilities to meet them; second, the continuing expansion and deepening of the interconnection between China, world politics and the world economy, in which China’s stakes are rising; third, the increasingly significant impacts of China upon the outside world in various areas from trade and finance to the environment and natural resources, and the corresponding growth in the latter’s expectation and demands with regard to China’s positive role in the international community; and fourth and finally, alongside globalization and universal industrialization, which have affected China dramatically, there has been a multiplication and growing prominence of threats or dangers – which are widely regarded as global challenges – together with the increasing weight of international cooperation and growth of multilateral structures in the discourse and even practice of world politics.

There is also another group of factors driving this evolution. Paralleling the enormous changes within the country brought about by reform and opening up, China’s understanding of the above global challenges, combined with its particular perspectives and policies, has been altering gradually. Compared to the state of affairs only a few years ago, China has progressed significantly, responding promptly and often taking the initiative to assume responsibilities on the global stage. An assessment of China’s response to global challenges and the multilateral cooperation they imply needs to take into account its particular context and characteristics, which are imbued with inner contradictions and dilemmas. In most cases, these have made China’s response to global challenges slower and less than the expectations of the west, which so often perceives the world in a universalistic /absolutist way. These factors include various huge and often grave economic and social bottlenecks that demand or sometimes force the Chinese government to prioritize them in resource distribution. Closely related to that, China’s rapidly increasing capability remains inadequate for the
expansion and escalation of its international responsibilities. Among the primary enduring concerns determining China’s external posture and foreign policy, there has been what could be described as an overwhelming concern: the Chinese government often feels that the west’s demands, in terms of shouldering international responsibility, will surpass what China can do and thereby hurt its economic and other interests. Moreover, the multiplicity of China’s foreign policy interests often means that a policy intended to meet a particular global challenge will conflict with another that is compatible with other foreign policy interests (especially a long-established policy), resulting in hesitant, small revisions in an attempt to balance needs, instead of the creation of a new policy. Inherent in multilateral cooperation and structures is the difficult issue of the balance of power – who gets what, who is dominant and who is weak. A powerful but new entrant to the global arena is generally in a relatively weak position and is therefore more concerned with the distribution of power and resources than others.

Several factors regarding China’s way of thinking also have a major impact on its global role. Due to the particular context and characteristics, China’s opinions often differ significantly and profoundly from those held by many western countries, making China reluctant to cooperate with the latter, and often only in limited ways. China’s more particularistic relativistic perspective has also restrained its international commitments. In short, it can be said that China’s ‘synthetic middle position’ is increasing its universalistic elements and reducing its particularistic ones. In other words, it has moved closer to the west but has (and will continue to have, at least in the near future) relatively more particularistic characteristics.

The ‘trilateral’ cooperative structure composed of nation states, international organizations and transnational civil society groups is often most advantageous for coping with global challenges because of its broad reach and mobilization. Here China’s prospects for participation and contribution have a major weakness: due to historical, political and ideational causes its government is largely insulated from transnational civil society groups, while the country lacks, in general, groups of this sort active in world politics, that is, various NGOs and citizens’ groups that would be loyal to China’s body politic but relatively independent and armed with their own latitude and capabilities of transnational activity. For these groups to be enabled, China, primarily its government, must challenge those inhibiting elements in its political culture, governing system and policy habits. In this way, the prospect that China’s ‘grass roots’ could participate in ‘global governance’, playing an important role therein, would be opened up. Failure to enable greater civil society activity would seriously disadvantage China in one vital aspect of future world politics, significantly reducing the contributions the country could make to the world response to global challenges.

Global financial crisis, required reform and China

At present, the world faces several types of ‘global challenge’ in the fields of economy, security and, lastly, the environment, natural resources and public health. Among these, economic global challenges have been drastically highlighted by the current financial crisis and recession. This storm broke in 2008 and swept throughout the world with extraordinary speed, demonstrating disastrously the inherent pathology and regulation ‘vacuum’ of globalization. Globalization has developed to such a degree that world finance, and therefore the world economy, has become so complex as to be extremely difficult to understand accurately, predict successfully and regulate effectively, while the situation greatly induced and facilitated ‘greed and irresponsibility on the part of some’ in the words of the inaugural address of President Obama, who had been dominant in the globalized financial system. In this situation of emergency, most governments reacted in similar fashion, with little prior international consultation, that is, remedial state intervention and government regulation as the first priority, while they and their people still hope more than ever to overcome the severe global financial disorder and trade malfunctions through international cooperation and multilateral structure.

China has turned out to be one of the very few countries admired because of its substantial economic and trade volumes that have enormous global impacts, combined with its foreign exchange reserve (the highest in the world), and potential capacity for global financial succor. (And for many it is also because of China’s huge trade surplus with the US, EU, Japan and several middle economic powers.) Existing international multilateral structures in the area of finance, whether the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank or G8, and the formal and informal multilateral rules on international investment and financing are far from compatible due to their narrow reach and obsolescence arising from the changing world financial balance, a consequence of China’s rise. Moreover, notwithstanding their continued dominance on the world stage, these institutions are taking increasingly seriously the contributions China could make, and the responsibilities it should bear. There is less discussion about the gains it might obtain and the rights it should enjoy.

On China’s side, the situation is not very encouraging, at least in the near future. Domestic economic pressure, which has increased dramatically due to the severe global downturn, together with the quite unhealthy economic growth mode upon which China still depends
(in spite of the imperative of ‘scientific development’ advocated by the political elites in Beijing, which is characterized by balanced economic and social development against ‘GDP obsession’ and laissez-faire marketization) has led to a serious imbalance of foreign trade (i.e. an enormous trade surplus), which has been mitigated too slowly and inadequately. And at the same time, China’s usually quite prudent approach in conducting state affairs, characterized by concern for practicability and cost-effectiveness, and its foreign policy tradition restrain one possibility: that as a key global actor it might actively push for the reform and renovation of the world financial multilateral structure. Due to their inherent caution, ‘the current generation of Chinese leaders … are not comfortable throwing their weight around too much on the international stage’ (Dyer, 2008).

In one sense, an enormous trade surplus is the most important source of China’s rising strength, but it is also one of the biggest points of contention in its relations with the United States and the European Union. In the case of China–US trade relations, this huge surplus has had its counterpart for years – China’s massive purchase of US treasury bonds and other dollar assets. This in essence constitutes a major pathology of the current world economy: China’s money lending, together with that of Japan, has maintained to a substantial degree the highly unhealthy structure of American finance and consumption characterized by the ‘expenditure spree’, whereby the US has been able to provide a major indispensable market to China for selling labor-intensive merchandise produced in the framework of a similarly unhealthy development mode characterized by ‘GDP growth obsession’. This logic can be described, without much cynicism, as ‘China and the US spoil each other’, and in corresponding degree, spoil the world.

Forced by the severe financial crisis and the even greater reliance on China’s loans, the Obama administration had until recently remained mute on the trade controversy with China, an attitude extraordinary in China–US relations this decade. Due to this reticence and several other factors, bilateral relations across the Pacific had enjoyed a honeymoon period since President Obama took office. It is in this context and the well-known enthusiasm of the Chinese government about this Sino–American honeymoon that made Obama’s decision on 11 September 2009 to slap high tariffs on cheap imported Chinese tires so surprising and enraging to Beijing. China’s anger was expressed instantly and in the strongest terms by the Ministry of Commerce, the main government agency dealing with foreign trade. It condemned the tire tariff decision as a ‘grave protectionist action’, warned that ‘abusing trade relief measures will damage China–US trade relations’ and made a clear threat of trade retaliation. This kind of language is rarely used by Beijing so it carries real force (Xinhua, 2009). However, at the same time, the Ministry’s reaction shows a sophisticated streak of restraint. In its statement the Ministry mentions that the US government was ‘forced by domestic political pressure’ to raise its ‘unreasonable demands’, a phrase partially exonerating American policy makers. The threatened retaliation involving American chicken parts and motor parts, in the words of the Christian Science Monitor, ‘seems designed to minimize the impact of any retaliatory measures it might take’, because chicken parts accounted for a little over 1 per cent of overall US poultry exports to China last year and in the first half of 2009 fell sixfold even from this insignificant level; while China reduced import tariffs on auto parts a little over two weeks ago, which ‘would appear to limit its ability to impose serious new sanctions on such goods’ (Ford, 2009).

A trade dispute like this will not overly damage bilateral relations. Beijing and Washington have tried to prevent the dispute escalating into something much more serious. However, it has probably reminded Beijing what most commentators in East Asia said during the presidential campaign last year about Obama and the Democratic party’s protectionist inclination. The Chinese government might also consider the possibility that as the US gradually moves out of financial crisis and reduces its financial dependence upon China, substantial trade disputes and rivalry may raise their ugly heads again, damaging bilateral relations as in the past. In this sense, China–US relations could return to ‘normal’ from the ‘honeymoon’ that has lasted nearly a year. A similar scenario is likely between China and other western countries, given the imbalances in trade.

Different perceptions on security: China’s unique position

Ongoing global challenges in the field of security are mainly nuclear proliferation, transnational terrorism, and genocide and ethnic cleansing. Compared with the economic challenges presented by the global financial crisis and recession, it is far from certain that nuclear proliferation, terrorism and humanitarian disasters in the present era are so widespread and intense that they can be regarded universally as real global security challenges. In other words, there are potential or actual (i.e. publicly unexpressed or expressed) widespread controversies, but these lack a global consensus. As to the understanding of their cause and even the estimation of their likely consequence, the situation is even more unclear. One can understand this by considering the policies or mentalities of governments, together with the views and dispositions held by their publics, on the following major issues and events: the North Korean and Iranian nuclear problems; the nuclear arms tests by India and Pakistan; Israel’s nuclear armed capability; the issues of Hezbollah
However, since US–DPRK bilateral talks based mainly on public expressions of its nervousness: 'We are expecting China denuclearization. It made the South Korean government pay lip service to the principle of Chinese economic aid to North Korea, again without provocations including North Korea's second nuclear test, US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill declared:

For those who closely follow the US–China relationship, what we are doing with China today with respect to a neighbor of China is unprecedented. So perhaps someday in the history books … [the North Korean leader] … will get a lot of credit for bringing the US and China closer together (quoted in Parameswaran, 2006).

However, since US–DPRK bilateral talks based mainly on American concessions began in January 2007, generally the ‘particularistic’ dispositions on the part of those concerned have been strengthened in comparison with the ‘universalistic’ cause of denuclearization of North Korea. Beijing seems increasingly determined to avoid serious alienation from Pyongyang for the sake of denuclearization, enduring patiently the latter's arrogance and unfriendly attitude, while conducting bilateral trade and direct investment in increasing volume. The most recent major development is China Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang in early October 2009, in the context of Bill Clinton’s surprise visit to Pyongyang on 5 August, followed by President Obama’s quick consent to US–DPRK bilateral talks, following months of extreme provocations including North Korea's second nuclear test. Premier Wen's visit resulted in much increased Chinese economic aid to North Korea, again without Pyongyang even paying lip service to the principle of denuclearization. It made the South Korean government publicly express its nervousness: 'We are expecting China to explain the details of its economic cooperation programs with North Korea and whether they violated the Security Council resolutions’, Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan told a group of South Korean news media editors (quoted in Choe Sang-hun, 2009). The ironic conclusion could be that American policy in the direction of some ‘appeasement’ toward North Korea's nuclear program could make Beijing's policy toward Pyongyang more unsatisfactory in the eyes of Washington. That is, American policy could stimulate or even force China to take a ‘unilateral’ approach, reducing pressure against Pyongyang's nuclear and missile ambitions and increasing economic assistance, in a far from unconsciously conducted diplomatic competition with Washington to win Pyongyang’s favor as it were, leaving joint actions by the five powers (China, the United States, South Korea, Japan and Russia) on the North Korea nuclear problem, and even perhaps denuclearization itself, as a victim to some degree. Regardless of the above, China’s comprehensive diplomatic efforts regarding North Korea, combined with parallel efforts to maintain and develop relations with South Korea, suggest that Beijing has been pursuing, gently as it were, its long-term interests in the peninsula with unique patience and stamina (Yinhong, 2009).

As for Iran’s nuclear problem, China has on the one hand always promoted denuclearization of that country in the UN Security Council, Six-Nation Meetings on Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as in bilateral diplomacy with all parties concerned. On the other hand, China has preserved and even developed its relations with Iran, which are important to its interests in terms of energy and diplomatic influence, while firmly maintaining the principled ‘Chinese understanding’ of the whole issue. During the writing of this article, tensions over the Iranian nuclear issue increased significantly, with the US and Europe initiating new sanctions and increasing pressure (especially American) upon China to endorse them, despite China’s different interests with Iran. China’s attitude is and will continue to be ‘striking a balance’. ‘China wants to see a diplomatic solution rather than hurrying to sanctions’, this author was quoted as saying by The Guardian. 'It is willing to give selective cooperation to Europe and the US, but it is conservative'; China might eventually back ‘very limited’ sanctions, but would be reluctant to do so and might well oppose them outright (quoted in Branigan, 2009). Iran is an important country for China, which has dramatically increased its energy links as well as substantial diplomatic interests. According to a New York Times report in October 2009, this has made Obama administration officials regard China as being more reluctant than Russia to act against Iran (Landler and Wong, 2009).

With regard to transnational terrorism, China has consistently demonstrated its firm opposition, and joined in international antiterrorist cooperation as long as it is...
perceived to be reasonable, relevant and within its capability. However, at the same time China has insisted on several principles that have both universalistic and particularistic elements but are more characterized by differentiation and careful treatment of specific situations, an approach that differs from the American ‘antiterror universalism’. These principles, according to the Chinese government, are mainly as follows:

- all sorts of terrorism must be opposed, and the international community should take legislative, administrative, judicial and other necessary measures to resolutely combat them;
- any form of terrorism is hazardous to the international community and no country, party, or individual group should take double standards based on political or other selfish intentions while dealing with terrorism;
- the measures, means, and methods adopted in combating terrorism should not aggravate national rivalry, religious hatred, conflict between civilizations, and estrangement between people;
- anti-terrorist actions should conform to the aim and principles of the UN Charter and international law, have firm evidences, define distinct targets, avoid hurting innocents, and be limited to reasonable extent;
- China opposes the linking of anti-terrorism policies with specific religions and nationalities;
- in the process of fighting terrorism, the settlement of existing problems should be taken into account and a solution in the long run borne in mind as well;
- countries should fully employ various means combined rather than merely rely on military force (Xinhua, 2006).

In opposing terrorist forces and their actions, China’s primary concern has mainly focused upon those that directly target China and its citizens, and this will be even more so after the brutal slaughter of almost 200 residents in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang in northwest China in the summer of 2009, and the consequent threatening declaration by some transnational terrorist organizations to attack China.5

With regard to genocide and ethnic cleansing, because of the complexity of the situations and perceived impropriety of interventions, China did not join the multinational action (except in the case of the Rwandan genocide), and condemned NATO’s Kosovo war and opposed the proposed UN sanctions against Sudan about Darfur. In future, the most challenging question China may face could be whether the decades-long tradition of self-imposed restriction on its military involvement in the world, reinforced by the inflexible doctrine of noninterference, should be revised according to the requirements of particular cases.

The contentious issue of climate change: China’s complex position

Transnational dangers associated with the environment, natural resources and public health have been almost universally recognized, at least at the level of rhetoric, due in good part to the protracted efforts of European and North American civil society groups, the policies of major EU member governments and the work of relevant UN bodies. In many countries, environmental deterioration, depletion of natural resources and threats to public health have caused concern globally in recent years, leading to growing prominence in public debate and global policy-making circles. This is particularly the case with the environment, especially the issue of climate change. The 14th Conference of Parties (COP-14) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Poland’s historical city, Poznan, in December 2008, was impressive for its unprecedented size: more than 9,000 representatives of governmental institutions and NGOs from 186 sovereign states and administrative areas participated (Xinhua, 2008). Without the global financial crisis and recession it induced, climate change would surely be the priority among current global challenges, not only because the EU had effectively built up momentum in 2007, and the new American administration changed Washington’s perspective, but also because concern for climate change has nearly universal appeal and moral legitimacy. In addition, the issue is connected to the domestic imperative of environmental protection and energy saving, which have become primary concerns and challenges for many countries.

However, several factors make meeting the challenge of climate change extraordinarily difficult. There are major and substantial differences between states with very different degrees of development and societal conditions. The chief concern is equity between nations: countries such as China and India see western countries as primarily responsible for climate change through their levels of development, industrialization and consumerism. Thus they argue that the west is obliged to shoulder responsibility for its past and present pollution levels, and also because they are more able to. Less developed countries will play their part in response.6 The inherent complexity and difficulty of distributing obligations and costs is aggravated by the diversity among states. This has led to inadequate global multilateral structures and ongoing difficulties in reaching major global agreements on challenges in the areas of the environment, natural resources and public health. Recent
Compared to Europe and North America, China is a latecomer to issues of environmental protection, energy saving and climate change, and exhibited in the past some ‘unilateralist’ behavior in these and global public health issues due to a failure to recognize their significant global implications, China’s international responsibility or the imperative for international cooperation, especially institutional. However, in recent years, because of the influence of world opinion and related domestic challenges, the Chinese government has publicly recognized the need to address with vigor these global problems, has made efforts within its capabilities and has increasingly begun to participate in multilateral endeavors.

‘China does well on climate change’, said Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in 2007. He said the Chinese government was very aware of the challenges posed by the impact of climate change, and was doing what it could to combat it, including improving energy efficiency and investing in new and renewable sources of energy, such as hydro-power (CCTV.com, 2007).

Perhaps the most encouraging recent development is President Hu Jintao’s speech delivered on 22 September 2009 at the United Nations Climate Change Summit. He vowed urgent action to cool an overheating planet, outlining an ambitious program which included plans, among other things, to plant enough forest to cover about 150,000 square miles – an area the size of Montana – and generate 15 per cent of China’s energy needs from renewable sources within a decade. He said China would also take steps to improve energy efficiency and reduce ‘by a notable margin’ its growth rate of carbon pollution as measured against economic growth. ‘At stake in the fight against climate change are the common interests of the entire world’, Hu said. ‘Out of a sense of responsibility to its own people and people across the world, China fully appreciates the importance and urgency of addressing climate change’ (quoted in Heilprin, 2009).

The developing countries represented by China are factually the victims of enormous emission by the advanced countries of greenhouse gases since industrialization. In per capita terms China’s emission is only one fifth of the United States’ … At this issue, one should not take into account only the amount in total but disregard that per capita, and only what is at the present but not what had been in history. Therefore, China … has been consistently calling on that the advanced countries must observe the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ and neither pick pretext nor play high-flown words … China will do her best to make the domestic work on energy saving and emission done well, but will not accept any demand violating the basic principle and can not bear the same responsibilities the advanced countries bear (quoted in People’s Daily, 2008).

While China puts forward plausible arguments about its responsibilities on climate change, there is no escaping the fact it has become the second biggest carbon dioxide emitter in the world. Thus China and advanced countries must adjust their respective positions in order to close the gap between them, otherwise the global
multilateral cause of emission reduction is unlikely to make decisive progress, and relations between China and the west might worsen with the addition of a major new ideological disagreement, or even antagonism.

The response of China and the west

It is right for China to refuse and resist some quite unreasonable demands and pressure from the west. At the same time, it is also right to increase substantially its commitment and share of international responsibility with regard to addressing the global challenges discussed above, as long as that is compatible with the principle of equity and China’s capabilities. These two things are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are in China’s vital interests, in the short and long term. Reducing China’s huge foreign trade surplus, greater dedication to environmental protection and engaging with more vigor in international nonproliferation is bound closely to its healthy development within and strategic security without. China should improve or reform the relevant foreign policies, participate more (even much more) actively in multilateral structures because of its greatly increased stakes, capability and responsibility, but also because of growing global dangers. In addition, as suggested above, China needs to reform its attitude toward civil society, both domestic and foreign groups.

There should be no doubt on the part of China that it must increase its share of international responsibility, as long as this: (1) will not violate its vital interests and surpass its capability; (2) results from equal consultation between China and the external world, rather than from any ‘dictation’ or coercion by the latter; and (3) largely matches China’s reasonable international rights and privileges. ‘International responsibility’ is rapidly becoming a key word in China’s grand strategy in world politics and its foreign policy, and a major challenge that it must meet actively and positively. It should not be forgotten that China represents about one-fifth of the world’s population; therefore its contribution to the world in terms of taking international responsibility will benefit its people accordingly.

At the same time, the west should be really aware that the following actions should be abandoned or avoided: too high and too pressing demands, explicit double standards, accusations and blame. These would not only be futile, but also delay or even block multilateral cooperation. The west needs to transform its attitude toward China, dispensing as far as possible certain cultural arrogance, narrow-sightedness, privileged, monopoly mentality and an overly universalistic world outlook. Whether the world can successfully overcome the global challenges discussed above will in great part depend upon which ‘philosophy’ or way of thinking becomes dominant: universalism/absolutism, particularism/relativism or a synthetic middle position between them. The future is still uncertain; the right effort is required more than ever.

Notes

1. Progress in this respect has accelerated in the last 18 months, such that this author’s mid-2007 ‘appeal’ is much less relevant. I wrote then: ‘What is increasingly required is China’s pledge of her “responsible rise”, a pledge that is also made in both words and deeds … “international responsibility” is becoming the foremost key word of the issue of China’s grand strategy’ (Yinhong, 2007).
2. There is besides these another important issue: that of the distance between attitudes at the rhetorical level and in reality. It is largely equivalent to the difference between the principle of commitment when it comes to addressing global challenges and the actual action agreed.
3. As a most recent celebrated dictum (a typically universalistic one) concerning the current financial crisis from European Commission President José Manuel Barroso says: ‘We are all in the same boat and we have to find global solutions’ (http://www.all-business.com/government/international-organizations/11768364-1.html).
4. One of the examples of that inadequacy is the International Criminal Court, which is criticized and boycotted by China, the United States, Russia and India. As to inefficiency, a major argument is that the international nonproliferation regime has failed to prevent the possession of nuclear weapons by India, Pakistan and North Korea, while never attempting to denuclearize Israel.
6. The former environment secretary of India, Pradipto Ghosh, said in June 2007 that India is not a ‘second class global citizen’. ‘India will not accept an endgame where Western people continue to pollute the earth in perpetuity at three or four times the rate of people in this country. And my impression is that China agrees’, said Ghosh (quoted in Peter Foster, ‘India Snubs West on Climate Change’, Daily Telegraph, 13 June 2007 (http://www.unep.org/cpi/briefs/2007June13.doc).
7. See China’s National Climate Change Program (full text), issued on 4 June 2007 by the State Council Information Office (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-06/04/content_6197309.htm).

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