

Asia-Pacific Security Studies



China's Pitch for a Multipolar World: The New Security Concept

Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Volume 2 - Number 1, May 2003

Conclusions

In the last few years, China has promulgated a "new security concept" (NSC) that advocates principles for international relations that the Chinese argue will promote peace and prosperity better than the current order, which is based on a "Cold War mentality."

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The NSC provides a vehicle for China to counter perceived American "containment" and assert Chinese regional leadership in a way that appears principled, responsible and non-threatening.

The NSC promotes cooperative security, an expanded understanding of security that includes threats beyond traditional state-vs.-state military conflict, and security cooperation that is aimed at promoting trust among states rather than targeting specific countries considered potential adversaries.

The NSC advocates multilateral dialogue, confidence-building measures, arms control and non-proliferation, and expanded economic interaction as policies that will reduce international tensions. It denounces the use or threat of force to settle political disputes and calls on large countries to treat smaller countries with equality and respect.

Promoting the NSC serves several Chinese foreign policy goals, including countering the dominant position of the United States, demonstrating Chinese leadership and assuring the region that China does not intend to use its growing power to dominate its neighbors.

While the United States should welcome China's endorsement of peace-promoting activities such as multilateral dialogue and confidence-building, the NSC also represents a challenge to American leadership—particularly in the Asia-Pacific region—as well as opposition to several specific U.S. policies or objectives.

These specific American policies include strong bilateral security alliances in the region, criticism of governments that fail to protect human rights, and plans to develop a system to defend against ballistic missiles.

The NSC is best understood as a tactical adjustment to China's external circumstances rather than a dramatic change in the PRC's foreign policy outlook.

With China's growing political, economic and military influence, Beijing is in a position to shape the international security environment in ways that might help or harm its neighbors. How China plans to use its might is thus a compelling question for the other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. China's "new security concept" offers an official endorsement of a set of principles for organizing interstate relations. The NSC thereby provides insight into recent Chinese thinking about the kind of international system that would suit China's interests. The NSC may offer assurance to Asian states that China does not intend to establish an exploitative hegemony, but it also makes plain Chinese opposition to several key U.S. policies relevant to Asia.

Background of the NSC

China welcomed the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for upward mobility. The bipolar structure of a world dominated by the conflict between the U.S. and Soviet superpowers left China permanently locked out of great power status. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the mainstream Chinese expectation was a decentralization of international power, the extinction of superpowers as a class, and in particular the decline of American military power and influence. Such developments were expected to allow China to take its place as one of four or five great powers in a multipolar world. Instead, however, the Chinese saw a stunning reaffirmation of U.S. military might in the 1991 Gulf War, a robust recovery of the American economy, and sustained American willingness to remain engaged overseas. Not only would the United States remain a superpower, but discussions among American strategists and a series of U.S. government policies in the 1990s convinced many Chinese that Americans increasingly viewed China as a potential adversary. Hence China's deep discomfort with pre-eminent American power, manifested in statements such as this typically oblique reference from the 2000 Defense White Paper: "Hegemonism and power politics still exist and are developing further in the international political, economic and security spheres. Certain big powers are pursuing 'neo-interventionism,' new 'gunboat policy' and neo-economic colonialism, which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence, and development interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security."

As a growing economic, political and military power, China has tried to shape its external environment to favor Chinese interests. For the last quarter century, this has principally meant reducing regional military threats and tensions and facilitating trade and investment to hasten China's economic development. At the same time, Beijing has attempted to cultivate international respect and has bristled at perceived slights to Chinese sovereignty.

These goals have sometimes come into conflict. In the mid-1990s China's assertive position in the dispute over ownership of territory in the South China Sea, culminating in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) forcible seizure of Mischief Reef in 1995, alarmed several Southeast Asian states despite the sub-region's previous inclination to avoid offending Beijing. In 1995-96, Beijing responded to the Lee Teng-hui government's attempts to increase Taiwan's "international space" with attempted military coercion in the form of missile tests and war games near Taiwan. The results, from China's standpoint, were mixed at best. Beijing demonstrated that the mere threat of force could damage Taiwan's prosperity, as the PLA sabre-rattling caused capital flight and drops in Taiwan's currency and stock market. On the other hand, Beijing's denunciation apparently gained Lee additional votes in the presidential election of March 1996. Worse were the longer term consequences. Months of bellicose posturing built up an unfavorable international image of the PRC as a warlike, anachro-

nistic country. Later that year Japan and the United States announced revised guidelines for their alliance that in China's eyes made Japan a potentially more active participant in anti-PRC operations, such as defending Taiwan against a PLA attack.

In sum, China desired to promote multipolarity, weaken what it perceived as U.S.-sponsored "containment," and prepare the regional ground for expanded Chinese influence. But Beijing had to do so in a way that would improve China's international image as a responsible, principled leader and marginalize the view of China as a growing "threat" to its Asian neighbors. The NSC contributed to all these objectives.

The NSC Explained

Official Chinese commentators first introduced the NSC in 1996 and formally unveiled it at a 1997 meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—a fitting venue, because Southeast Asia is perhaps the most important target audience for the concept. Since then many Chinese officials and scholars have reiterated the NSC, adding details and modifications that shed additional light on the strategic significance of the concept.

The NSC includes several themes. The first is the undesirability of the present security environment, which the Chinese say is based on outmoded "Cold War thinking" or a "Cold War mentality." Bipolarity, great power conflict, domination of the international agenda by the larger countries, disregard for smaller countries, and a concentration on traditional security threats are in Beijing's view characteristics of the old system. In contrast, security in the post-Cold War era should be considered comprehensive, not just military; the views of all countries, regardless of size, should carry equal weight; and non-traditional security issues should rival traditional issues in importance, Chinese commentators say.

Second, the NSC asserts that international relations should rest on principles of peaceful co-prosperity. Chinese discussion of the NSC often includes a recapitulation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which have been a mantra of Chinese foreign relations since they first appeared in a joint Sino-Indian communique in 1955. The Five Principles are "mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence." Elaborating on the Five Principles, the 1998 Defense White Paper states, "Each country has the right to choose its own social system, development strategy and way of life, and no country should interfere in the internal affairs of any other country in any way or under any pretext, much less resort to military threats or aggression." In the economic sphere, typical Chinese commentary on "equality and mutual benefit" explains that "all countries should strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation, open up to each other, eliminate inequalities and discriminatory policies in economic and trade relations, gradually reduce the development gaps between countries and seek common prosperity."

Third, the NSC advocates a philosophy and a set of policies that would fit under the rubric of what is commonly known among international relations analysts as "cooperative security." Chinese explanations of the NSC assert that "security is mutual" and should be sought through negotiation, cooperation, economic interaction and "promoting trust" rather than by confronting potential adversaries. Furthermore, the NSC calls for multilateral security organizations to carry out dialogue, confidence-building measures and arms control, and to help prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Security cooperation between states, the Chinese add, should not target any particular country.

Acknowledging the spirit of contemporary international norms that place the interests of the world community above the self-interest of individual states, China's 1998 Defense White Paper says "disputes on territorial and marine rights and interests between China and neighboring countries . . . are to be solved through consultation by putting the interests of the whole above everything else, so that the disputes will not hamper the . . . stability of the region."

The Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO)—known as the "Shanghai Five" until the accession of Uzbekistan in June 2001—is a manifestation of how the Chinese plan to operationalize the NSC. The SCO's chief official purpose is found in the title of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, of which its members are signatories. According to official Beijing media, the SCO subscribes to the principles of "non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any other country or region."

In addition to speeches and writings by Chinese officials and analysts which comment on the NSC, China's Defense White Papers of 1998, 2000 and 2002 contain sections discussing the NSC, which reprise the themes outlined above. Beijing also released a "Position Paper on the New Security Concept" during the ASEAN meeting in Brunei in August 2002. More recent treatments of the NSC demonstrate increased sophistication of presentation, exhibiting a relatively global outlook and greater development of the theory and practice of cooperative security. The writers of the Position Paper argue, for example, that "security cooperation is not just something for countries with similar or identical views and modes of development." In other words, the "security community" of industrialized and democratic Western Europe, whose peoples no longer contemplate going to war against each other, can be replicated in Asia, which is a mix of rich and poor countries and democratic and authoritarian governments.

Many Chinese policy statements explicitly condemn policies of the United States, a practice that tends to make plain the narrow self-interest underlying the principled rhetoric, but the Position Paper does not. Instead, the Position Paper makes subtle assertions that "all countries, big or small" should "treat each other as equals" and "refrain from interfering in other countries' internal affairs." As noted earlier, the significance of non-traditional security threats has been a feature of the NSC from the beginning, and the Position Paper appropriately points out that "The September 11 incident has glaringly demonstrated that security threats in today's world tend to be multi-faceted and global in scope."

Analysis: The NSC and U.S. Interests

In essence, the NSC is a Chinese proposal for an alternative international order superior to the current arrangement. That China should make such a proposal is consistent with China's self-image as a regional leader, major world power, advocate for the weaker countries, and moral exemplar. Accordingly, the NSC helps China make the case that its neighbors need not fear that a stronger China poses a threat to their interests—unless, of course, those interests include a strong security alliance with the United States. The NSC has short-term utility as a critique of U.S. military bases and activities in Asia, but also represents a broader statement of the kind of international political environment in which a growing China would feel secure.

Since China re-entered the international community following the Cultural Revolution, some observers have complained that Beijing's views of sovereignty, the use of force and multilateralism are outmoded. In recent years, however, China has exhibited some signs of "socialization"—adopting some of the modes of thought and behavior of its foreign trading and dialogue partners. The NSC is an additional indication that the world's engagement with China has borne fruit. At minimum, China's foreign affairs

elites understand the security discourse of the ASEAN and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. At maximum, the Chinese have accepted modern international norms and found a way to reconcile them with Chinese interests.

From an American standpoint, much of the NSC could be considered consistent with U.S. interests. Multilateral security discussions, activities that build international confidence and trust, and a commitment to values such as the peaceful resolution of political disputes are policies the United States could wholeheartedly endorse. For observers watching for signs of how the PRC intends to wield its growing power, the NSC is a positive development, as it evinces no plan for Chinese regional hegemony or the establishment of a Chinese sphere of influence. Nor is there any indication in the NSC of a Chinese desire to create an exclusive trade bloc that would shut the door to East Asia in the faces of American businesses.

Unfortunately, Beijing may not be prepared to implement these principles as fully as some foreign observers might hope. One important example here is China's position on alliances. On its face, the NSC suggests China has no intention to sponsor or join alliances that target either the United States or American allies. China officially opposes military alliances in general. The PRC has only one formal alliance, with North Korea, and even in that case Chinese officials in recent years have made clear they would not automatically offer military assistance if North Korea got involved in a war. How then to explain Sino-Russian security cooperation, particularly before September 11, which to many Americans appeared to be an informal alliance against the U.S.-Japan bloc? The Chinese argue that their "strategic partnerships" with many countries are consistent with the NSC. Chinese scholar Xia Liping asserts that unlike military alliances, which are directed against a particular country, "strategic partnership is not aimed at the third party. . . . Its substance is to realize mutual friendship [and] to strengthen cooperation. . . . At the same time, it is not exclusive." A more cynical interpretation is that the Chinese view the NSC injunction against alliances as a restriction upon the United States, but not upon themselves.

One might also wish China would apply the NSC to its relations with Taiwan. In cross-Strait relations, China admittedly relies on the threat of force to maintain leverage in an ongoing political dispute, even at the risk of imperilling the "stability of the region." The NSC, however, is a framework for international relations and therefore is not germane to PRC-Taiwan relations, which Beijing terms a "domestic" matter.

Much of the rest of it is either outrightly or potentially anti-American. Chinese foreign affairs analyst Chu Shulong, not known as an America basher, summarizes the NSC as "four no's": no power politics, no "hegemonism," no military alliances, and no arms races. This boils the NSC down to a statement of China's opposition to American unipolarity, America's alliances, and America's policies of supplying arms to Taiwan and developing an anti-ballistic missile system.

Scratching the diplomatic gloss off some of the abstract notions in the NSC quickly reveals opposition to specific American policies. The oft-mentioned support for the United Nations is a manifestation of Chinese discomfiture with perceived U.S. unilateralism, particularly under the Bush administration. "Arms control" in the NSC is a euphemism for resistance to the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and the U.S. plan to develop a ballistic missile defense system. Chinese scholar Ye Ru'an makes the subtle but unmistakable linkage with missile defense: "Such a new security concept means that all countries, big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, should have an equal right to security. No country should unilaterally seek absolute security by persisting in strengthening its both [sic] offensive and defensive military capabilities at the expense of the security of other countries."

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The NSC's reaffirmation of "non-interference" in the affairs of other states suggests a continuation of past conflict between the United States and China over issues such as American assistance to Taiwan and complaints from the U.S. State Department and private American organizations and individuals about inadequate protection of human rights in China. China could potentially use the principle of "mutual benefit" in economic relations as a basis for countering U.S. complaints about alleged violations of Chinese obligations under the World Trade Organization, which the PRC acceded to in 2001.

China's objection to the eastward expansion of NATO and to U.S. military presence in East Asia, including close security partnerships with Japan, Australia and Korea, is a problem that grows more serious as the rise in China's relative political and economic power gives the Chinese more clout with these American allies, each of which wants to maintain a stable working relationship with China. Australia, for example, considers China an increasingly important trade partner, particularly as a market for Australian food exports and raw materials. China's complaints about Australia's security alliance with the United States raise the possibility that Beijing could use its economic leverage to demand that downgrade its security cooperation with Washington. An obvious possible target of such Chinese efforts could be the American space tracking facility at Pine Gap, Australia. This facility might play a part in a future U.S.-sponsored anti-ballistic-missile system, which Beijing strongly opposes. As the American scholar William Tow points out, the day might come when the

Australians conclude the benefits they gain from their close collaboration with the United States, chiefly access to advanced military technology, is no longer worth the cost of incurring Chinese displeasure. Similarly, Japan and South Korea face the likely prospect of increasing Chinese pressure to evict U.S. military bases.

The NSC provides a framework for, on the one hand, supporting the U.S. activities of which the Chinese approve (such as heavy bilateral trade and combating terrorist groups) and, on the other hand, decrying the U.S. activities the Chinese dislike (such as American "hegemonism" and Asia-Pacific alliances). It is flexible enough to stand somewhat aloof from the short-term fluctuations in the quality of U.S.-China relations. With the two countries presently on relatively good terms, Beijing is applying the NSC in ways that are comparatively non-confrontational toward the United States. But the NSC could also accommodate stronger Chinese criticism of the United States in more trying times.

If the NSC can be considered a harbinger of Chinese intentions, the Chinese seem to believe at present they will be able to achieve security and prosperity without forcing their will upon their neighbors. They will, however, use their influence to undermine the position of leadership the United States now enjoys. While the NSC reflects increased Chinese self-confidence and understanding of international norms, it is best understood as a tactical adjustment rather than a sea change in Chinese strategic thinking.



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