

The geopolitical role of China: Crouching tiger, hidden dragon

“‘With the notion of iconography, Jean Gottmann demonstrates that spatial identity, nationalism, and the resistance of places can develop a power comparable to that of material forces.’ Within geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics, self-regard and self-esteem play an important role, since one’s self-image is the image one wants to ‘export’ and display in relations with others. Self-image also determines how people understand others, and it therefore influences strategic decisions. Like Gottmann, I would define these factors as ‘iconographic’.”

Fabrizio Eva

The author is annual contract professor at the University of Venice – Ca' Foscari, Treviso campus, Italy, with a course on Political and Economic Geography. Previously he had annual contracts at the Institute of Human Geography, State University of Milan with courses on Geopolitical Dynamics and Analyzing Methods. He is corresponding member of the IGU World Political Map Commission. He is a member of the editorial board of the international reviews Geography Research Forum, Geopolitics, and The Arab World Geographer. His academic interests include current geopolitical dynamics, international relations, borders and nation-state issues, ethnonationalisms, political and economic dynamics in Eastern Asia (particularly China and Japan), the geopolitical legacy of Elisée Reclus, Piotr Kropotkin and anarchic thought. Recent publications are: Cina e Giappone. Due modelli per il futuro dell'Asia (Turin, UTET Libreria, 2000); “La geografia politica,” in M. Casari, G. Corra Pellegrini and F. Eva, Elementi di geografia economica e politica (Rome, Carocci, 2003). Personal Webpage: <http://www.fabrizio-eva.info>.

Introduction

In May 2002 the world “giants” jointly announced their desire to organize a peace conference to put an end to the long-standing geopolitical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The photographs show the representatives of the giants, with US President Bush; Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivanov; the secretary-general of the UN, Kofi Annan; and President Prodi of the EU Commission among the most influential representatives of what is often termed the “international community” – that is, those who control and direct the centers of world politico-economic power (the USA, Russia, the UN [The Security Council, International Monetary Fund, World Bank], G8, EU, NATO, and WTO). Only China was missing.

Yet China is a permanent member of the Security Council with veto rights. It has a nuclear armament. With more than 1.2 billion inhabitants, it is the most populated country on earth. Through Hong Kong it has the largest currency reserves in the world. And it is on its way to becoming a major economic and industrial powerhouse.

So to what should we attribute China’s absence from a group regarded as influential in a geopolitical situation that has created problems in international relations since 1947? Was it an error? An oversight? An underestimation of China’s influence? Something else?

This incident suggests that a substantial difference exists between the dismissive/depreciating way that the so-called (Western-dominated) international community sees China as a geopolitical force and the way China sees itself and the role it intends to play on the checkerboard of international affairs. China and the rest of the world do not fully understand each other. However, China may win a more favorable position in international dynamics thanks to the unique features of its culture and an extraordinary capacity for pragmatism when negotiating on the home turf of its “adversaries.”

“With the notion of iconography, [Jean Gottmann] demonstrates that spatial identity, nationalism, and the resistance of places can develop a power comparable to that of material forces” (LEVY, 1999). Within geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics, self-regard and self-esteem play an important role, since one’s self-image is the image one wants to “export” and display in relations with others. Self-image also determines how people understand others, and it therefore influences strategic decisions. Like Gottmann, I would define these factors as “iconographic.”

In the case of China (fig. 1), it is possible to state that its current and future geopolitical roles are closely linked to the following factors:

- **The nature of the decisions made by the nation’s leaders in geopolitical dynamics** – China displays some significant peculiarities in that the political make-up of the country must reflect the behavior of its citizens within a society with long historical traditions and that groups together one-fifth of the world’s population. Only India is in a situation similar to China’s in terms of population, and the differences between the two in terms of authoritativeness, role, and the methods of dealing with international crises (China holding the stronger hand in each) demonstrate that cultural characteristics do have a certain influence.

China’s leaders have their own particular way of acting both domestically and internationally. This is the product of a millennia-old tradition and undoubtedly represents an iconographic point of resistance.

Other determining factors are:

- **A vision of one’s self (self-esteem)** based on an ongoing relationship with the territory, established over time through historical events and iconographically fixed within a national identity made up of the “representation” (narrative) of the country’s past and a conviction that the Chinese are superior;



Fig. 1: Map of China with administrative subdivisions – Provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities and special economic zones. (Source: Paris, La Découverte & Syros, 2002).

• a way of relating to “others” based on a particular view of life and the nature of social relationships that are traditionally shared (lifestyle).

China’s history, development, and the characteristics of its culture, language, and society are unique in world history. Although all cultures can be regarded as unique, the uniqueness of China’s culture stems from a combination of the extent of its landmass, the size of its population, and its long history.

In light of the above comments, it is important to highlight the historical-cultural characteristics of the iconographic factors mentioned, these retaining their determining influence even today.

“... immaterial strategic resources such as geographical factors, the role of history, cultural traditions, the sense of ethnic identity, the domination and use of influence in international organizations, and so on” (QIAO and WANG, 2001, p. 187). “In this regard Nature has been particularly generous to China. A long cultural tradition, a pacifist ideology, no cases of aggression, the strong economic power of the Chinese, a seat on the United Nations Security Council, and so on – all these elements are important ‘strategic resources’ ” (QIAO and WANG, 2001, p. 189).

The Chinese vision of the Chinese

Relationship with territory

China can be regarded as a “continent” unto itself (fig. 1). China regarding itself as the Middle Kingdom indicates that it gives its territory a significance that goes beyond its simple location along and between the Huang He (Yellow) and Chiang Jiang (Blue) Rivers. The Chinese view of themselves is based upon their centrality and the progressive degrees of barbarism found the farther one moves from the heart of the country. Since the world is divided into Chinese and non-Chinese, China is obviously seen as the pinnacle of desirability and civilization, with the nature of other countries’ relationship with the country determining their level of civilization (REYNAUD, 1992, p. 127).

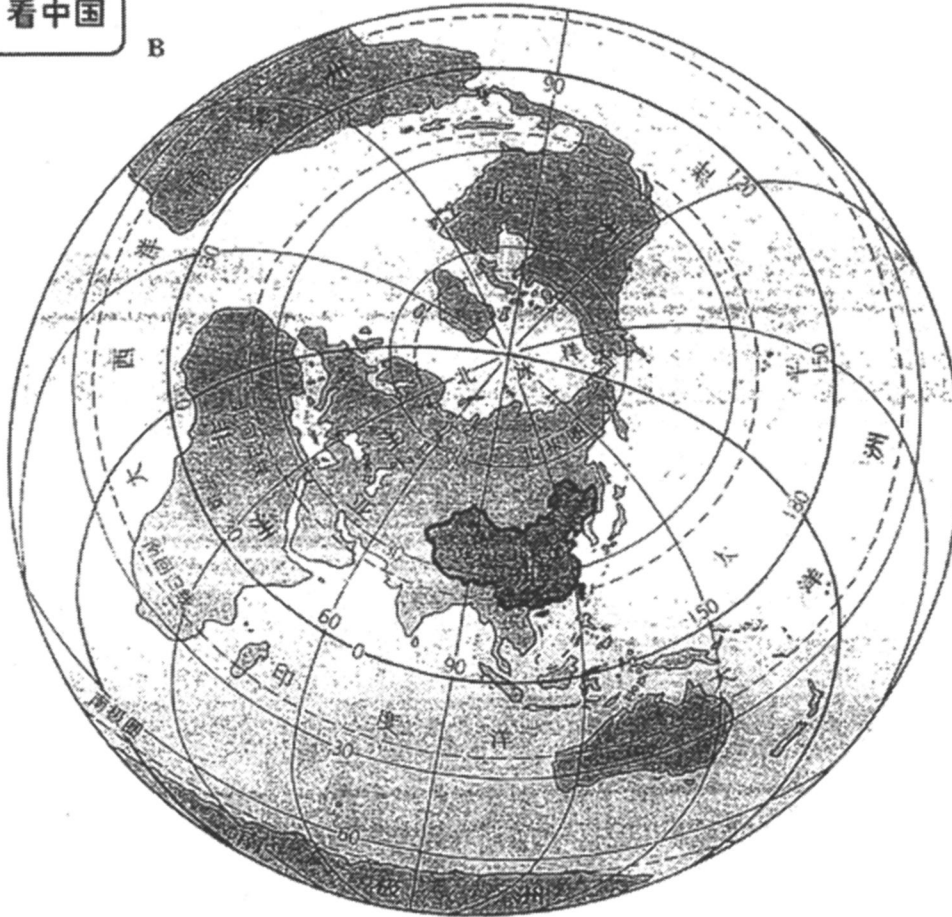
It was the nature of this territory, with the division between land and sea and the location of other countries so clearly marked out, that led to a view that it was both natural and desirable to expand this territory and demand tributes from adjoining populations (fig. 2).

Thus, it was not only the fact that China is a land bordered by water that led to a strong relationship with the territory, but also the belief that the lands lying to the west, southwest, and north

第一节 中国的疆域 A

从世界
看中国

B



1.1 中国在地球上的位置示意图 C

我们伟大的祖国是中华人民共和国。D

A = The Chinese Space

B = China seen from the world

C = China's location in the world

D = Our great country is the People's Republic of China

Fig. 2: The Chinese vision of the Chinese. (Source: liMes, "La Cina è un giallo," *Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, no. 1, 1995, p. 6).

were to be conquered or colonized, this producing the Chinese people's sense of centrality. China's geopolitical strategies and relations, both internal and external, have been modeled on the view of its territory as a continent, this always presupposing a relationship (be it friendly or defensive) with the "others," even if they are regarded as barbarians. There has also been a perception that those to the east and towards the sea – that is, the Korean Peninsular and the Japanese Archipelago – are "others." However, while the Korean Peninsular was easily made to pay tributes to China, the twice failed invasion of Japan by sea confirmed the attitude of the continental centrality of China.

Life philosophy and religious beliefs

Confucius and his theories on social organization heavily influenced all Asia. But there is no ignoring the fact that, unlike other Asian countries, China was also influenced by the teachings of Lao Tzu and Taoism. In China, Confucius's conceptual framework was widespread, but Taoism also had its effects. While the principle of *wu wei* – normally translated as *non-action* – is interpreted in many different ways, it is present throughout Chinese society. "Taoism is a practice" (BOREL, 1999) and as such it has penetrated into the behavior of the Chinese. Along with Buddhism, it has reinforced the tendency to accept authority (non-action) and the price that needs to be paid for stability/harmony – the ideal of Confucianism.

It is reasonable to regard the proverbial Chinese "patience" as the result of this millennia-old philosophical history, which geopolitically translates into pragmatism applied to reaching objectives mixed with the acceptance of change over long periods. For example, the 50-year China-UK agreement on Hong Kong – One country, two systems – gives an idea of the timeframes that the Chinese usually work to.

Is there a relationship between being Confucian and the linguistic structure of the Chinese ideograms?

Learning the language of the Chinese ideograms is independent to pronunciation: the "painted" characters maintain their meaning, irrespective of dialectical variations or different pronunciations. Learning the ideograms is a slow process that involves dedicating a great deal of time to memorization and writing – in other words, it is an ongoing exercise in patience. In combination with the Confucian tradition for "order," this can translate into a greater disposition to relentless work and study. This may provide some explanation of the country's rapid economic growth and its success in the fields of research and study (notably Chinese students at Western universities).

Given that few people in China today would regard themselves as Confucian – a term nevertheless used widely in the West – it is possible that the "linguistic" angle, rather than the "ideological/philosophical" one, provides the most satisfactory explanation of certain typically Chinese behaviors. But what most strikes Westerners about the Chinese is the "spontaneous" adhesion of the individual to community and the hierarchical order. Such acceptance – so different from the Western concept of the "absolute" freedom of the individual – must be the result of one or more specific factors. The presence over thousands of years of an emperor at the head of the political structure, which by necessity was hierarchical and founded upon officials/mandarins, offers us some explanation at the community level. On the other hand, the linguistic factor, as a gymnasium for the mind, offers some explanation of individual behavior.

The concept of hierarchy and the role of the family

The role of, and regard for, the family, seen in the extended and hierarchical sense, is the third main factor that explains

that oriental peculiarity generically labeled as Confucianism.

In the first place, in China blood ties are extremely important, outweighing respect for the authorities and business interests. The Chinese regard family ties as being of the utmost importance. But it is precisely for this reason that they also see belonging to other groups as natural – for example, groups based on common origins in a particular region or shared economic interests – although, with family ties being the strongest, the level of commitment and fidelity to other groups is relative to interest in, and/or the nature of, the relationships involved.

Respect for one's elders remains very important in China, despite the profound social changes currently taking place. But the Chinese have also always recognized individual excellence, which can place even young people in positions of respect – provided due form is observed.

This attitude to family ties, interpreted in the broadest sense to include people with the same surname, not only highlights the differences between East and West (a similar association between all the Smiths or Joneses of the world is unthinkable) but also gives an idea of the links that can even exist over distances with other members of the Diaspora. Chinese people will always turn to a family member if there is trouble and can activate a "Chinese" network of ties and acquaintances, independent of other forms of assistance.

This triggers a process of integration that is always based on "us" and "them" – the "them" being foreigners (at the best of times), adversaries (often), and enemies (sometimes).

In Chinese society, women have had a very restricted role, submissive to, and dependent on, the close male figures in their lives – elders, the father, the husband, and brothers. It was, however, possible that within the family unit a woman could play a strong role if she was elderly or circumstances had left her without a male figure or with a "weak" masculine presence. The declaration of equality of the sexes following the victory of the communists was without doubt a revolutionary event with far-reaching social implications. But it should also be pointed out that 50 years after the formation of the People's Republic of China, there are still very few women at the top.

At the geopolitical level, the absence of a female vision is important, but in this regard there is little difference between China and the leading nations of the world; the few women who have had important roles have often had a "masculine" approach and decidedly conservative political leanings.

Heavenly mandate and mandarins, power, and officials

China has had more than a few imperial dynasties and the country has seen many conflicts for the conquest of power. This is the result of another Chinese concept: the so-called heavenly mandate, according to which the emperor is responsible for fulfilling a mandate from heaven and on this basis can be judged and removed if he fails.

The victory of a faction and the substitution of the emperor were seen as proof of a new heavenly mandate. Natural disasters were also interpreted as a sign of the gods' disapproval and were often used as the justification for revolts against the ruling emperor. The Confucian philosopher Meng Tzu (371–289 BC) clearly expounded the theory that emperors can lose their claim to power if they are unable to guarantee prosperity or if they leave the country at the mercy of invaders.

Power therefore derived from the heavenly mandate and not directly or simply from the physical person of the emperor. This was the background against which the mandarins and, later, the "officials" came into being. Initially one became a mandarin on the basis of one's knowledge and not by birth. The mandarins were under the command of the emperors (or

their representatives) but still acted with some discretion of their own. They therefore had their own real power and were not simply a mouthpiece of the emperor.

In modern times, the authority and respect (if not fear) commanded by the mandarins passed onto state officials and, later, Communist Party officials. Historical accounts and biographies (CHANG, 1994) clearly show how highly considered officials, and their families, were (and are), including those who disgraced themselves.

Chinese geopolitical strategy is decided in closed circles, peopled by professional politicians/officials. Rarely are there significant differences of opinion (in the sense of the presence within these circles of "others" with radically opposing views). While this strengthens the unity and effect of the decisions made, it also makes them liable to negative repercussions arising from errors in judging the potential actions of "others," particularly foreign others.

Modern history

Over the last 150 years, China has seen the collapse of its self-esteem and, since the time of the Opium Wars (19th century) to the constitution of the People's Republic, has had its sense of a collective identity sorely tested. Thirty years of Maoism and more than 20 of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms can be seen as a gradual reconstruction of self-esteem, based on a sense of community and nationalism, as well as a reaffirmation of a Chinese *uniqueness* linked, as in its imperial past, to a strong state.

China remains the most populated country on earth, making up around one fifth of the world's population. It is still a single-party communist country and since 1971 has been a permanent member of the Security Council with veto rights (following the expulsion of Taiwan). That China is able to very discreetly and pragmatically (that is, only to its direct advantage) exercise these rights in no way detracts from the fact that it is among the five most powerful countries on earth as regards that variety of world political power that is accepted, or at least tolerated (EVA, 1999), by the so-called international community. It is also a nuclear power and has the technology to put missiles and satellites in orbit. This makes it a power to be respected on the military level, while its large population places it beyond attack, apart from by means that only the USA, and possibly Russia, have access to. At any rate, any invasion of Chinese territory would result in massive losses of lives and equipment.

From the moment China decided to open its economy to capitalist-style production systems, its ideological danger to the West diminished. However, its economic power is constantly increasing – some people are already talking of China's GDP surpassing the USA's in coming decades (BURSTEIN and DE KEIJZER, 1998).

Nevertheless the West still adopts a "dismissive" approach to China. This approach may be dangerous since the Chinese government is not only adept at diplomacy; it is active at every level and uses the economy, in particular, as a tool for earning, discreetly, important positions and respect internationally.

The reclaiming of national dignity and imperviousness to any international pressure allow China to simultaneously play a regional and global geopolitical role. The reforms introduced by Deng increased the economic possibilities of a territorially united nation with a central authority that exerts a strong presence. Quite apart from declarations of principle regarding key ideologies, there has been a return to, or strengthening of, two traditional Confucian values: the Middle Kingdom and the authority of those in power.

China acts with patience and its objectives are simultaneously clearly defined, pragmatic, and important. It has strong self-esteem, which manifests itself in a strong sense of nation

among the people and in a recognition of the role and/or authority of the leaders.

The hierarchical power structure can make (effective) decisions within set times. The structure of power and society are controlled, this making it possible to repress destabilizing dissent and take agreement within society for granted without the "time wasting" of democratic processes.

Relationship with the "outside" world

There is a characteristic of the Asian people, and of the Chinese in particular, that can be summed up by the phrase, "Do not lose face" – the Chinese are pragmatic but very conscious of the "due formalities." This can have negative repercussions in international relations, and China has occasionally been inflexible when defending its rights or points of view. This approach can be successful when dealing with weaker states but can be dangerous when dealing with powers on an equal footing or the US superpower, since they also do not wish to lose face.

The United States

The relationship between the USA and China is much more convoluted and has a longer history than is commonly thought. As long ago as the second half of the 19th century, the Americans were hanging onto the shirrtales of the enormous colonial powers of Europe in the slicing up of the failing Chinese empire. The Americans nevertheless endeavored, more than the Europeans or Japanese, to establish relations with China, economic and commercial in particular. These became a support, including political, for the young republicans and Chiang Kai-shek until his defeat in 1949. The fact that China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto rights derives squarely from Anglo-American strategy, which, immediately after the war aimed to give nationalist governments political support and powerful roles.

Paradoxically, Mao's victory ran the risk of turning this support into a "favor" to the communists. Until 1971 the seat at the UN was occupied by Taiwan, but Nixon's and Kissinger's opening up to Maoist China – a part of their anti-Soviet stance – opened the doors to a different type of relationship. For the Chinese, the USA went from being an imperialist paper tiger to a useful ally against what the Chinese referred to as "USSR hegemonism."

The USA has had a heavy presence in the Pacific and Asia since its victory in World War II, and this presence has been strengthened through time, despite Viet Nam. The end of the military conflict with the disbanded USSR saw the end of the nuclear control of the Asia-Pacific airspace but not its electronic control via spy planes. Even with a reduction in its military bases (the Philippines), the USA maintains troops throughout a large area and periodically renews defense treaties with Japan and South Korea. This is a cause of concern for the Chinese in that these treaties are based on the USA's sophisticated weaponry and extraordinary technological supremacy in the electronics field.

The Chinese closely monitor the scope of these "defense" agreements for the main reason that they do not want there to be "coverage" of the Taiwan area, this representing the most vexing aspect of the issue.

China does not feel threatened today by the US presence in South Korea and Japan. Rather it regards this presence as a limit on its capacity for diplomatic maneuvering. Although it is willing to act as go-between/guarantor in the difficult case of North Korea, it does not want to put itself in a situation where it feels surrounded. Fortunately, other than the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, there are no territories in dispute between China and

the two Koreas or Japan, and China's protests regarding military accords – which imply the use of long-range missiles – are more declarations of principle than acts of aggression.

The Chinese leadership is pragmatic and at the same time knows how to assess (and appreciate) power. As regards the USA, there is an obvious (temporary) acceptance of its superiority. But at the same time there is also the implication that China wishes to be treated as an equal to the one remaining superpower; it is the only country that can do so.

The most difficult issue both to resolve and interpret (particularly in the West) is Taiwan. It could very possibly provoke unforeseeable geopolitical dynamics and put China and the USA in the position of not being able to lose face and thus push them into actions that could jeopardize global stability.

The existence of two Chinas remains a difficult issue, partly because – despite what those in mainland China may say – Taiwan has been politically separate from China since the Japanese occupation in 1895. Even before that date, it never played a significant part in China's history. Paradoxically Taiwan's main link to mainland China stems from the fact that Taiwan's leadership is "imported," and only in very recent times has there been a political reawakening of the native inhabitants, who generally declare themselves to be in favor of independence. The students who protested in favor of independence in March 1996 went so far as to declare that they were not Chinese but Taiwanese. They also used the slogan "Two countries, two systems" (PISU, 1996), "heretically" altering the slogan used to define the situation in Hong Kong ("One country, two systems").

The so-called threat of invasion in the form of missile launches by China during Taiwan's presidential election of March 1996 would appear to have been aimed at encouraging the election of a president from the Guomindang, the enemy party in Taiwan in favor of the One China principle, rather than a democratic (separatist) party. The launches were therefore not a threat, but a form of indirect pressure to maintain the *status quo*.

Seen from this perspective, and bearing the economic changes in mind, the differences between the two Chinas appear to be more symbolic/ideological than substantial; Chinese pragmatism and the Asian-style long-term view may produce outcomes that are unforeseeable today.

In light of the above, it is easier to understand the Chinese leadership's strong reaction to the Taiwanese president's declaration in July 1999 of wanting to consider relations between the two "entities" as relations between states. Such a statement was on a collision course with the decades-old declaration of the existence of only one China and, in particular, forced the People's Republic to immediately reassert its position and back it up with credible signs – military threats, rhetorical declarations during the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the republic, and so on.

In view of the aspects discussed, a desirable long-term future scenario for China would be a generalized recognition of China's cultural uniqueness and centrality, and therefore an acceptance of the guiding role of the People's Republic, seen primarily in the traditional and geographic sense of the Middle Kingdom (LIU, 1995). This uniqueness would be based upon strong economic connections in the area as well as a marked politico-administrative autonomy of the outlying regions – first and foremost Taiwan.

The Hong Kong experiment of two different administrations should be useful for China in pragmatically finding a balance in a formal unification of all the Chinese "pieces" into a so-called Greater China that would include overseas Chinese communities and Singapore. Changes in the Beijing and Taipei leadership, through natural means and/or (multiparty?) elections, should play a central role in changing through time the charac-

teristics of the equilibriums reached. If this is achieved, Chinese pragmatism and seeing issues in the long-term will have paid off.

The new Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian, a member of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, has made no official mention of Taiwan's independence since he took office. His use of words has been very "Chinese," that is, self-censored (GOMEZ, 2000), and it has not been necessary for Beijing to step up the tones of confrontation beyond the traditional diplomatic protests against any action or statement (even those that may appear irrelevant to us Westerners) that might undermine the One China principle.

Bush is certainly no Clinton, and Sino-American relations have begun to lead in new directions. As regards Taiwan, the Bush administration is more in favor of US military protection, but this only happened after the EP-3 spy plane incident of 2001, an event which the Chinese regard as their victory. In 2002, when meeting the press with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Bush said, "The position of my government has not changed over the years. We believe in the peaceful settlement of this issue. We will urge there be no provocation. The United States will continue to support the Taiwan Relations Act." Bush became the first US president to refer to the act on Chinese soil, without mentioning the three communiqués. The next day, though, Bush did try to reassure Beijing, saying, "I've reiterated support for the 'One China' policy." (KEEFE, 2002).

Although adopting a different diplomatic strategy from the Democrat Clinton, Bush also hastened to reaffirm support for the One China policy. "The September 11 terrorist attacks in the US pushed the EP-3 incident into the background. Beijing quickly gave rhetorical and diplomatic support to the war on terrorism. This led to Bush traveling twice to China in four months. He now embraces a 'candid, constructive and cooperative' relationship with Beijing – though officials in Washington warn quietly that the administration has postponed, not cancelled, its internal debate about whether to view China as a partner or as a foe" (KEEFE, 2002).

China-US relations are dynamic and have contrasting alternating phases. This is possible because, at least in some areas, they are relations between equals.

The question of Tibet was, and is, dealt with extensively by the Western media, and the Dalai Lama traveled the world, being received almost as if he were a head of state, encouraging open intolerance of the Chinese leadership. Many in the West thought it possible that Tibet's autonomist (or separatist) stance would meet with some success. However, Chinese pragmatism and long-term outlook have often quashed the expectations of the West (Hong Kong, for example).

While in the West we make romantic films about Tibet, in China there is a massive emigration of Han populations to Tibetan cities. In the end, the Tibetans will be a minority in their own country.

USSR and Russia

Sino-Russian relations have always been quite "cold" with alternating phases. The fact that the Soviets claimed the world leadership of the communist movement could not easily be accepted by the Chinese, particularly after Khrushchev's criticism of Stalinist excesses seemed to set the USSR on the road to revisionism.

The unexpected rupture in good relations with the Soviets brought two geostrategic issues, which had concerned the Chinese for centuries, to the fore: the control of Mongolia and the control of the upper Silk Road, which leads from Xinjiang to central Asia and the Caspian Sea. Only a few short years passed between the political rupture with the USSR and the exchange of artillery fire along the Siberian frontier – particular-

ly in the area of the Ussuri River, a tributary of the Amur. The confrontation/clash with the Soviet Union and its hegemonism, which the Chinese – even more than the West – feared would result in the conquest of territory, was one of the reasons behind China unexpectedly opening itself to the US in the early 1970s.

The disintegration of the USSR and its subsequent loss of power, including military, eased tensions and led to the signing of accords regarding disputed borders. China still has claims on some areas but prefers to regard the northwest Siberian zones as unpopulated but rich in mineral resources, against the excessive population levels in the bordering areas of China. Although only a small market, these areas are more conveniently supplied with goods from China rather than the distant industrial zones of Russia – ignoring the fact that Chinese goods are consistently growing in quality. Even Mongolia has begun to regard the trade and transport routes across China to the sea as more expedient.

Over the last ten years, Russia and China have passed through alternating phases of closeness and relative mutual indifference, depending on the more or less discordant relations of each with the USA on economic matters (Russia) and geopolitical issues (China).

China's current relations with India and Pakistan are an inheritance of its relationship with the USSR. There was a series of wars between China and India during the 1950s/1960s for the control of territory that, although Indian, China had invaded, claiming that the land belonged to China for obvious geographic reasons (the area in question lies north of the Himalayas). It is also for this reason that the Soviet Union traditionally had good relations with India, while China gave more importance to its relations with Pakistan.

Today, with the crisis generated by the attack on the twin towers in New York, the question of Afghanistan has again taken a central place in the game of world geostrategy, and China has been able to declare its support of the US response, partly because it is not at odds with its established positions and relations.

Geopolitical dynamics in the ex-Soviet countries of central Asia would appear to be more delicate, with a massive presence of US troops, organized as a logistical support to operations in Afghanistan, and, precisely for this reason, destined to remain there for the long term to ensure the effective control of this territory. This presence certainly cannot be pleasing to China, which has seen an important geographical corridor closed off, and it may begin to again feel encircled by military forces. China's offers to collaborate with Russia, including on the military front, can be interpreted from this perspective.

Nevertheless, China knows that for the moment it does not have much freedom of movement on the international checkerboard and prefers to concentrate its moves in its priority areas: the managed development of the economy and the question of Taiwan. This would explain China's apparent indifference to the UN Security Council's proposed reforms and its relative silence on geopolitical issues affecting large geographical areas, such as Latin America, Africa, and Israel and Palestine. When the Chinese believe that the "others" regard them as sufficiently strong and recognize its international role, it will begin to openly act as a world power. For the moment, it acts shrewdly to achieve its aims using "Chinese" methods.

Objectives and tools of Chinese geostrategy

China, Greater China, "Chineseness," and the Chinese Diaspora

Chinese communities have established themselves more or less all over the world, while maintaining their own customs

and socio-cultural ties through blood relationships rather than nostalgia for the land of their ancestors. The Chinese have always displayed a great capacity for adapting to the socio-environmental conditions of the places they emigrate to and great determination in achieving the goals of bettering the financial well-being of the family, the individual, and the community as a whole (WEIDENBAUM and HUGHES, 1996).

Chinese communities abroad organize themselves as self-centered, self-sufficient groups, culturally based on their *Chineseness* and maintaining family ties locally and with China through contacts within the extended family. Ties to the home country are symbolic and represented by respect for family ties (and some traditions). Just as China expands across the continent, the Chinese expand across the world – to the Han, expansion means assimilation. The characteristic of continentality, of conquest and territorial expansion, remains – after all, the Han are the result of an ongoing process of absorbing other cultures.

Throughout Asia, Chinese communities are centers of economic power. For this reason, in some countries (Malaysia) they are denied "ethnic" political representation, while in others (Indonesia, Viet Nam), during times of economic crisis or social unrest, they become the target of attacks by other ethnic groups or are made the scapegoat for economic problems. Their unquestionable business skills have brought economic power to the overseas Chinese, who today are courted by the communist leaders on the basis of common cultural origins.

From this perspective, economics can become a much more efficient geostrategic tool than military power, given that it would appear impossible to compete with the US in the latter area (at least for the moment). The Chinese have shown themselves to be extremely pragmatic in learning and applying the mechanisms of capitalist economics, and have used, and continue to use, these mechanisms in an expedient way (EVA 2000).

What China is not willing to accept is interference in its domestic affairs by other countries and any challenge to the central authority of the Communist Party. This stance can, however, be traced to cultural traditions that the communists did not invent but merely brought up-to-date.

It is no coincidence that after the anti-Confucian fury of the Cultural Revolution there is now a conceptual return to the country's past, and the most attentive observers can detect in China's actions on the world stage its traditional diplomatic skill in reaching objectives, a shrewd use of words (particularly words with symbolic overtones), and an attitude intended to achieve a formal recognition of the country's superiority (once this took the form of tributes to the emperor, even without military occupation or colonization) or its role (negotiations "between equals" with the United States for entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), but also direct relations with the European Union and other powers, such as France and Great Britain). President Jiang Zemin refused for a week to talk by telephone with President Clinton after the "accidental" bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 during the Kosovo crisis. After a month of confidential negotiations, the Chinese earned themselves 50 million dollars in damages.

President George W. Bush had no more success in the confrontation/clash with China over the US spy plane incident in April 2001, when, because of damage (caused, what is more, by a Chinese military aircraft) it was forced to land on Hainan Island. Although having previously made statements with a very different tone from those of Clinton (China was no longer considered a partner but a competitor), Bush had to modify both his tone and approach to China. He realized (or was made to realize) that one does not order China about and that the words used in statements are weighed very carefully since it is possible to achieve important real outcomes provided due

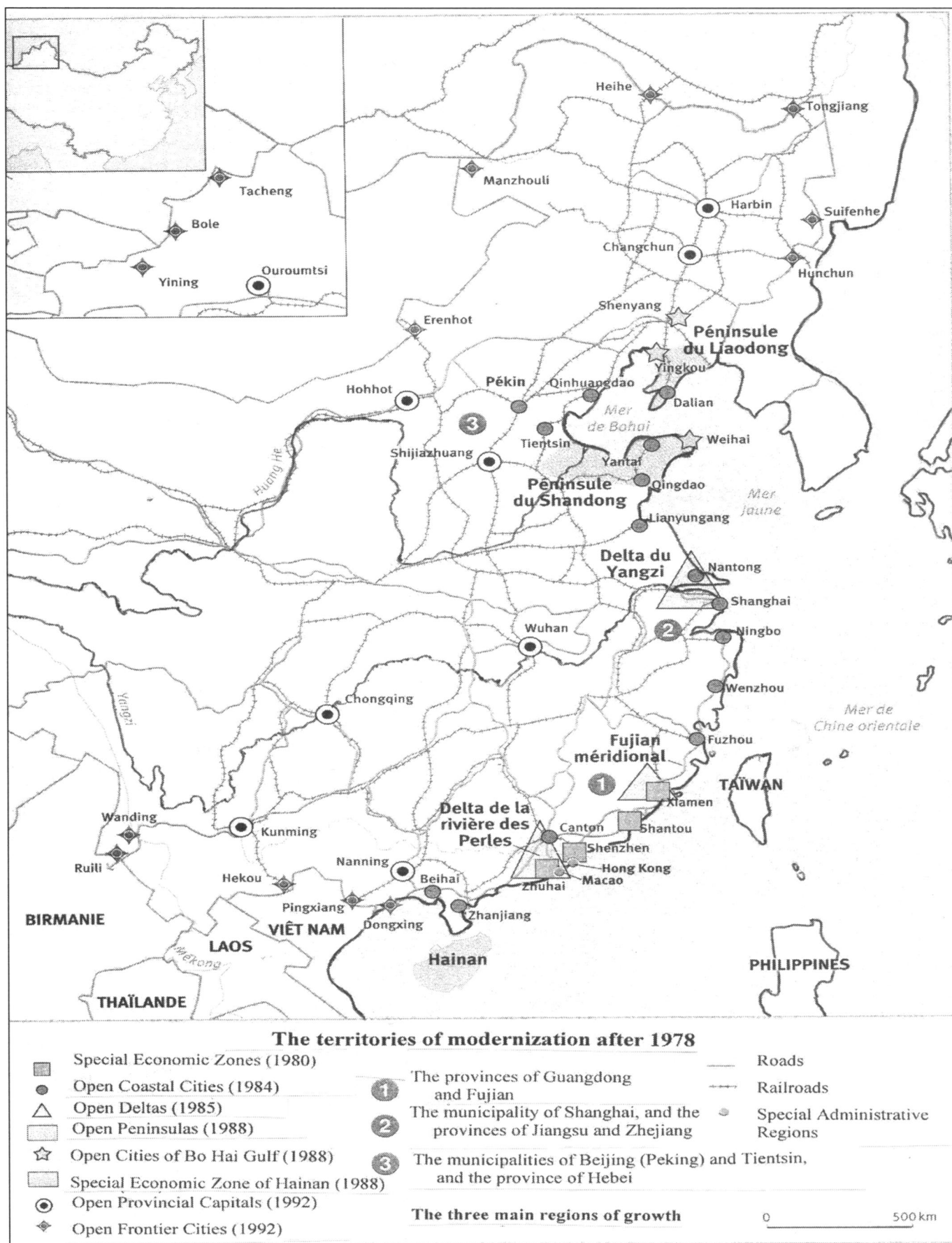


Fig. 3: China – The territories of modernization after 1978. (Source: Michel Foucher, *Asies nouvelles*, Paris, Belin, 2002, p. 279).



Fig. 4: China – Current administrative structure. (Source: A. Roux, *La Chine au XXe siècle*, Paris, SEDES, 1998).

respect is given to form and no one (especially China) loses face. The tale of the two US “very sorries” in the official joint document that concluded the affair is very significant (KEEFE, 2002) (figs. 3 and 4).

Economic instead of military might

From the point of view of the country’s image, the non-devaluation of the yuan during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1999 was a powerful symbol of stability and international authority. Nevertheless, business people and economic experts continued for months to predict, suggest, and declare that devaluation was inevitable and economically correct, without taking into account that it was precisely China’s authoritarian and hierarchical structure and its relative economic separateness that allowed it to make contrary and autonomous decisions. The negative social effects and economic costs of certain decisions can be more easily made acceptable to the people if those in charge have a firm grasp on the reins of power.

China’s entry to the WTO began a new phase. The West plans to conquer China’s market through the progressive elimination of customs barriers and to encourage the spread of “democracy,” given the obsessive repetition of the belief that a consumer who is “free” to choose will want equal freedom of choice at the political level. Given the situations in Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, I have many doubts on this score.

For the moment, China continues to benefit from the greater number of investments from all over the world, to increase its manufacturing capacity by harnessing Western technologies, and to see its export capacity to the USA and rich Western

markets grow. Its significant commercial weight directly influences diplomatic and political relations. Even the US now has internal economic pressure groups that have called for moderation during US-China geopolitical crises. Moreover it should not be forgotten that the overseas Chinese control significant flows of capital and have already shown themselves to be susceptible to the call of cultural and blood ties (SEAGRAVE, 1996).

Behind this lies the Chinese pragmatic and devil-may-care use of the mechanisms of capitalist economies, including the most speculative. Making money is not merely a skill; it is culturally accepted by any Chinese in whose home there is a fat, smiling Buddha holding a case of money. The economy is, however, steered with prudence and a firm hand so as not to run the risk of it running off course, as in Russia, or causing damage to society, as in the case of Indonesia. Control of the internal political situation allows the Chinese leadership to proceed step by step as it gradually becomes more open economically.

The leadership’s control appears to remain strong, even though the challenges of the technological society and capitalist individualism are also very strong. The repression of people in Tian an Men Square was essentially easy for the government, such was the imbalance in power between the students and the army. Also, in spite of the wishes of the West, it was a simple matter for China to repress dissident Wei Jinsheng’s call for the “fifth modernization: freedom,” a slogan that is difficult to spread (and make understood) in China, where for the most part it is easy to restrict the spread of news and falsify information. Control from above has become troublesome in the case of the Internet (although it exists, its spread is greatly re-

stricted in China), but the almost exclusively China-centric messages posted on the Net by the Chinese after the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade should suggest to the West that it should be careful not to overestimate the weight of opposing voices in China, such as the students in Tian an Men Square. The repression of the Falun Gong sect and the imprisoning of thousands of its adherents in 1999, as well as the little (although stubborn) resistance on the part of these people, estimated to number 100 million in the West, should confirm once and for all that China's social conditions are exceptional and that the government does not intend to concede an inch as regards the sharing of power (particularly with organized movements), unless it is on its own terms and is implemented as a gradual process – a very gradual process.

Conclusion

China's current situation, both domestically and internationally, appears to be more than stable. Economic growth continues strongly, regardless of fluctuations in international markets, and direct foreign investments continue at high levels. Its manufacturing capacity is increasing, primarily because of technologies from outside the country. Exports are sizeable, but should a problem occur, China is able to sell its products to a huge domestic market (particularly in the large cities and coastal areas). Raising one's voice with China is not economically advantageous for anyone.

At the international level, the ready support given to the US in its "war on terrorism" represents a kind of promissory note that the US will honor when China later uses less than orthodox methods to protect itself from "terrorism" in Xinjiang or Tibet. It would not appear to be a coincidence that, after years of tension, there were no particular problems in April 2002 regarding the question of Taiwan: April/May was the period in which the US Congress approved the annual supply of arms to Taiwan – the quality and quantity of these shipments have always been carefully scrutinized by China.

At the level of international relations in general and as regards the world's most explosive geopolitical situations (Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, and India-Pakistan), China maintains an extremely circumspect position, consisting of a small number of cautious statements but also "discreet" indiscriminate sales of arms (to Iran and North Korea, for example).

China does not intervene unless it believes that it is directly

affected. But it also does not hesitate to make itself heard when it needs to reaffirm its positions of principle. An example of this is the case of Macedonia, which initially recognized the Republic of China (Taiwan) when it was looking for technology at a good price. After the People's Republic of China vetoed the continuing UN control of the Macedonian territory, and after the ethno-political crisis involving the ethnic Albanians, Macedonia suspended diplomatic relations with Taiwan to go on side with the People's Republic of China.

China conducts itself in an extremely pragmatic fashion; it clearly defines its goals and strategies, and can identify the right moment to act. The title of a recent Chinese film, which also met with success in the West, ideally encapsulates China's current, and possibly future, geopolitical role: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. China's aim? To (again) become the epicenter of the world (FRANK, 1998).

References

- BOREL, H. (1999), *Wu Wei* (Vicenza, Neri Pozza Editore).
 BURSTEIN, D. and A. DE KEIJZER (1998), *Big Dragon* (New York, Simon & Schuster).
 CHANG, J. (1994), *Cigni selvatici* (Milan, Longanesi).
 EVA, F. (1999), "International boundaries, geopolitics and the (post)modern territorial discourse: the functional fiction," in D. Newman (ed.), *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity* (Ilford, Frank Cass).
 — (2000), *Cina e Giappone. Due modelli per il futuro dell'Asia* (Turin, UTET Libreria).
 FRANK, A.G. (1998), *ReORIENT* (Berkeley, University of California Press).
 GOMEZ, J. (2000), *Selfcensorship. Singapore's Shame* (Singapore, Think Centre).
 KEEFE, J. (2002) "A tale of 'Two Very Sorries' redux," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (21 March).
 LEVY, J. (1999), *Le tournant géographique* (Paris, Belin).
 LIU Miao-Long (1995), "Le strategie politiche ed economiche della Cina nella regione dell'Asia Pacifica," in G. Corna Pellegrini (ed.), *Oriente Estremo 1995* (Milan, Unicopli).
 PISU, R. (1996), "In piazza per Taiwan indipendente," *La Repubblica* (17 March).
 QIAO Liang and WANG Xiangsui (2001), *Guerra senza limiti* (Gorizia, Libreria Editrice Goriziana), p. 182.
 REYNAUD, A. (1992), *Une Géohistoire. La Chine des Printemps et des Automnes* (Montpellier, GIP RECLUS).
 SEAGRAVE, S. (1996), *Lords of the Rim* (London, Corgi Books).
 WEIDENBAUM, M. and S. HUGHES (1996), *The Bamboo Network* (New York, Free Press).