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China starts to throw its weight around
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P. 9

The international policy issue that is soaking up most of the world's attention at the moment is the fight against Islamist terrorism. But cruise the corridors of foreign ministries and think tanks in Washington, Canberra or Tokyo and the other huge question exercising people's minds is the rise of China, and its growing competition with the United States.

China's increasing confidence, diplomatic dexterity and hard power, if plotted on a chart, would produce an impressive growth curve. Analysts rightfully focus on China's growing clout in southeast and northeast Asia. But there is another arena worth watching very closely: the United Nations.

Since Beijing wrestled the China seat at the UN off Taipei in 1971, it has grown more and more comfortable in it, steadily joining specialist organs and acceding to treaties. From the mid-1990s a further shift occurred, illustrative of a larger shift in Chinese foreign policy, as the country shed the garb of historical victim and began to assume its new identity as a great power.

The new style can be discerned in three aspects of China's relations with the UN, starting with the Security Council, of which China is the only permanent Asian member. Historically, China was a passive, even defensive, actor in the Council, rarely seeking to shape the agenda or draft resolutions. China used its veto much less than any other permanent member and generally abstained from voting unless the issue touched on red-button issues such as Taiwan and Tibet. In the past decade, however, China's representatives have behaved more confidently in the Council chamber and more volubly before the media. China is now more willing to take the lead on issues, behaving more like a normal great power – and being treated as such by other Council members.

A similar development has occurred in peacekeeping. In the past, Beijing routinely characterised UN peace operations as imperialist endeavours; today, it deploys more military and civilian personnel to UN peacekeeping operations than any other permanent member of the Security Council and is the fifteenth largest supplier overall. There are limits to China's enthusiasm for peacekeeping, and it remains cautious about humanitarian intervention – nonetheless the turnaround is significant.

Finally, the quality of the people China sends to New York, both as diplomats and officials, has improved noticeably. One observer described the old approach this way: 'They come. They smile. They leave.' No longer is that the case. According to one UN insider, China used to take a 'prophylactic' approach to placing people in the UN, protecting them from outside influence. 'Now they want to spread their influence.' There are a number of senior and well-respected Chinese officials in the Secretariat, and both the current permanent representative and his predecessor are regarded highly.

Beijing's new diplomatic confidence can be perceived in the way it is opposing Japan's push for permanent membership of the Council in the current round of UN reform proposals. Its diplomatic subtlety can be perceived in its involvement in the activities of good global citizenship, including, for example, the donation of moneys to tsunami relief. Another striking sight was that of China challenging the US's request in May 2004 for renewal of the immunity of its troops from prosecution by the International Criminal Court.

There is plenty of debate among China-watchers as to the significance of these and other changes in Chinese foreign policy. There is no doubt that Beijing is developing its diplomatic deltoids and saving up its soft power, but to what end? Some see the beginnings of a newly aggressive grand strategy; others see a defensive ploy by China to defy America's containment strategy in a forum Washington does not dominate; yet others see a sincere attempt to engage with the world while the Chinese economy develops. Regardless of Beijing's ends, however, deeper engagement with the UN will plainly be one of the means it employs. Washington and its supporters need to pay more attention, therefore, to an organisation they too often neglect.

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