

China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations

DENG Yong

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Reviewed by CHO Youngnam, Seoul National University

The rise of China is one of the most important changes in the international order (particularly in Asia) during the post-Cold War period. It is an important fact in world history that may lead to a reorganization of the international balance of power among the world powers, including the United States and China, as well as a change in the U.S.-led international order. Scholars face the task of attempting to analyze what exactly the rise of China will mean and what impact it will have on the international community. If my memory serves me correctly, more than ten books have been published over the past five years on this subject and there are many more research papers. Mid-level scholars specializing in the study of China or international politics have carried out the majority of these studies.

The rise of China in the economic, military, and diplomatic sectors is an established fact. On the economic front, it has become the fourth largest economy after the United States, Japan, and Germany (China is expected to become the third largest economy by the end of 2008) and the third largest trading country. The average rate of economic growth

between 1980 and 2007 was 9.7%. The country also boasts the largest global foreign exchange reserves (1,800 billion USD as of the end of September 2008). Because of the meteoric rise of China in the economic sector, internationally advanced countries expect China to play a more positive and leading role in the current worldwide financial crisis (which originated in the United States). In terms of military strength, China ranks as the third largest military power that is equipped with nuclear weapons; after the United States and Russia, China has the second largest defense budget in the world. In the U.N., China is a permanent member of the Security Council, along with the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France. The United States is unable to unilaterally deal with matters such as terrorism, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), and non-traditional security matters (such as drugs, human trafficking, or infectious diseases) without Chinese cooperation.

There have been numerous controversies concerning the impact that the rise of China will have on the international community. The debate between Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer carried in the magazine *Foreign Policy* in 2005 was a particularly conspicuous one.¹ In the debate, Brzezinski said that China had striven to foster a stable international environment in which it could apply itself to domestic economic development, adopting a strategy of positively participating in, rather than presenting itself as a challenge to, the existing international order. What he said was that the rise of China has been peaceful and will continue to be so, at least for the time being. The efforts made by China to modernize its national defense posture are aimed at securing minimum deterrence concerning the issue of Taiwanese independence, rather than at posing a challenge to the hegemonic position of the United States. However, Mearsheimer

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans," *Foreign Policy*, No. 146 (January / February 2005) (available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>).

counter-asserted that not a single country has peacefully risen as a world power in the history of humanity, pointing to Germany and Japan as leading examples. He added that, if China continues to maintain the current rapid growth, then the United States will mobilize all possible means to suppress it, which will embroil the two powers in serious military competition and possibly war. He argues that China can never be a world power only by peaceful means.

China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations, by Yong Deng, addresses the international impact of the rise of China. In the book, the author criticizes the problems of Mearsheimer's realist theory of the balance of power. He also analyzes Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War period from the perspective of the pursuit of a world power status (i.e. the strategy of becoming a world power), the process of the actual promotion of the policy and the results. The book (Chapter 1) points out the problems inherent to studies about the rise of China conducted from a realistic viewpoint. According to the realist theory of the balance of power, under the anarchy of the international community, an emerging power like China pushes ahead with the policy of internal and external balancing toward existing hegemonic powers. An emerging power presents a challenge to existing hegemonic powers through internal economic growth and a military buildup, along with the establishment of external alliances with other countries. However, the book points out that such a theory does not apply to Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, since China has never adopted a policy aimed at balancing the power between China and the United States. Based on such a view, the book (Chapter 1) raises three research questions concerning the rise of China: 1) What are the background to and causes of the difficulty experienced by Chinese diplomacy in the post-Cold War period? 2) What kind of efforts does China have to make to secure the status as a world power in the international community and what role did "power" play in the process? 3) How does the Chinese strategy to win world power status appear in foreign policy?

Yong Deng uses “status” (a core concept in sociology) in the attempt to analyze the foreign policy adopted by China in the post-Cold War period (Chapters 1 and 2). According to him, the concept of “status” is crucial in the analysis of Chinese foreign policies for four reasons: First, China is very sensitive about its status in the international community, and has regarded the attainment of world power status as one of the core objectives of its foreign policy since the mid-1990s. Second, the concept of “status” helps settle the problems with existing studies focusing on power and national interest in the analysis of international politics, while providing a means of explaining how the current foreign policy of China is different from that of the past or from that of other emerging powers. Third, the concept of “status” makes it possible to gain a grasp of Chinese politics (both domestic and international) and the interactions between the two. Finally, the concept makes it possible to focus on the entire process of the efforts made by China to overcome discontent related to participation in the existing international order as well as the material, political, and social handicaps that stand in the way of the desire to join the ranks of world powers.

Based on these four reasons, in consciousness and approaches, the book analyses the Chinese strategy in the pursuit of world power status. The text focuses on four points: First, it focuses on how China recognizes and copes with the issue of human rights and the theory raised by the United States, which frames China as a threat (chapters 3 and 4). The book says that China associates such an attitude on the part of the United States with the efforts by the United States to prevent China from joining the ranks of world powers, mainly by taking positive countermeasures, with the conviction that it cannot win world power status without taking such a negative view of it. Second, it addresses the relations China maintains with Russia, India, the EU, and Japan, which like China, are trying to join the ranks of world powers against the hegemonic position of the United States (chapters 5 and 6). Through such an analysis, Yong Deng illustrates how the Chinese strategy in

pursuing world power status differs from that of other countries and how it appears in actual diplomatic relations with other countries. Third, it looks at the kind of policy China has adopted toward neighboring countries and African nations (chapter 7). China needs to win recognition from Third World countries if it is to win world power status. Thus, it is necessary to analyze Chinese foreign policy toward such countries. Finally, it examines China's policy toward Taiwan (chapter 8), and concludes that unification with Taiwan is something China must accomplish in the process of winning world power status.

Yong Deng makes the following assertions (chapter 9) through an analysis of all that has been stated. First, the author stresses that the realist theory of the balance of power concerning the rise of China does not make sense. The author says that Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War period differs from the past and the balancing power policy adopted for the power politics of traditional powers. It is also claimed that China has pushed ahead with a foreign policy of pursuing a world power status over the past 30 years. According to the author, Chinese foreign policy was conducted with the aim of settling numerous domestic problems, maximizing the benefits brought on by globalization, expanding national power, and earning a positive recognition of existence in the international community at the same time. China has strived to win positive recognition from the international community rather than gain recognition as a world power based on economic or military strength. According to the author, that is why China is very sensitive to the criticisms of the international community over human rights and the China threat theory, while making effort to promote the image of a responsible power or minimize a negative national image.

Yong Deng says that the Chinese foreign diplomacy strategy of winning world power status is based on the pursuit of an internationally recognized status rather than a policy of balancing power with the United States. The following four points verify this: First, China has adopted an ambivalent policy of partly accommodating the U.S. criticism of human

rights and the China threat theory, while partly resisting them. China is now attempting to show that such negative images are wrong. Second, since the mid 1990s, China has established strategic partnership relations with other emerging powers, such as Russia, India, the EU, and Japan, in an attempt to counter the United States as part of its pursuit of world power status. However, the relations that China maintains with Russia and India are not to be construed as security alliances against the United States. Third, China is doing all that it can to appear as a world power through proactive multilateral diplomacy toward Asian and African countries. Fourth, China has adopted a pragmatic policy toward Taiwan (i.e. by taking a hardline stance against the Taiwanese movement for independence) and by offering programs for mutual economic cooperation as a conciliatory gesture. The author says that China will continue to adhere to the aim of joining the ranks of world powers in the face of any expected turns and twists.

Finally, an examination of the significance of the book and its problems. The book is praiseworthy in that it offers an analysis of a new subject from a refreshing perspective concerning Chinese diplomacy. In the past, studies concerning Chinese diplomacy focused on the national rise in the economic and military sectors from a realistic perspective, along with the subsequent impact of China on the international order. As such, these studies shed light on economic competition and military conflicts. Yong Deng however, has differentiated himself from other researchers by choosing Chinese foreign policy and the actual diplomatic practices related to the desire to become a world power for analysis. Also, his study is regarded as having contributed to the theoretical study of international politics by criticizing the problems of the mainstream perspective as seen in the realist theory of the balance of power through the case of China.

The book has a few limitations. First, the analysis neglects Chinese foreign policy toward the United States and the bilateral relations between the two countries, which are to be the most important subject of

analysis with regard to the Chinese pursuit of world power status. It was proper for the book to study the way in which China has coped with criticisms of human rights and the China threat theory. However, it cannot avoid criticism for leaving out a review of the relations between China and the current global hegemon, United States. This is in consideration of the fact that the United States is the most important partner or inhibitor concerning the Chinese pursuit of world power status.

The book also invites criticism for excluding the soft power strategy of China from its analysis. It is essential to review the Chinese soft power strategy (which is associated with the enhancement of national status in the international community) if the book is attempting to demonstrate that China is striving to join the ranks of world powers through the pursuit of a new status within the international community rather than trying to counter the hegemonic position of the United States and the U.S.-led international order through the reinforcement of economic and military strength. As noted by existing studies, China has been engaged in global public diplomacy since the late 1990s and such an effort has been reinforced since the beginning of the Hu Jintao Period in 2002.² Leading examples of the Chinese soft power strategy include: the “responsible power” theory and the new concept of security adopted during the Jiang Zemin Period; the emergence of the “peaceful rise” and “peaceful development” theory, the advocacy of a harmonious world order, and the promotion of the construction of Confucius Institutes all over the world during the Hu Jintao Period; and the carrying out of a diversified cultural diplomacy in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. China became a regional power by properly exercising

² Cho Youngnam and Jeong Jongho, “China’s Soft Power: Discussions, Resources and Prospects,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (May/June 2008), pp. 453-472; Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

such a soft power strategy, thereby negating the negative public opinion characterized by the China threat theory and the China collapse theory. It is deemed essential to review the soft power strategy of China when analyzing the Chinese pursuit of world power status.

Finally, there is a need for a more systematic and comprehensive theoretical review of Chinese foreign policy and actual diplomatic behavior with regard to the pursuit of world power status. Yong Deng offers a sufficient review of the realist theory of the balance of power and properly points out the problems and limitations of such a view. However, it should be pointed out that the book lacks an explanation of how the analytical perspective adopted by the book is different from, or associated with, liberalism or constructivism, which, along with realism, are the major theories governing international politics. Such a review is required from the perspective of theoretical sophistication and in an exploration of the facts concerning Chinese foreign policy.