Will China’s rise be peaceful?

During 2003 and 2004 the talk of the town in Beijing’s political, media and diplomatic circles was the ‘peaceful rise of China’, its superpower status. China’s leadership, led by President Hu Jintao, had presented a new vision: China’s rise would be different from those of Germany and Japan, whose arrival on the world stage triggered two world wars.1 Riding the wave of globalization, China would rise through long-term economic growth, trade and investment, regional cooperation and integration, all guided by deft and peaceful diplomacy.

When George W. Bush assumed power, the US decided to overhaul its Asia-East strategy by emphasizing its relations with China and Japan, and downplaying those with Taiwan. For the next 2 years, 2001-2003, Secretary of State Richard Armitage had been working to transform Japan from a defeated, pacific, economic superpower into a military power capable of providing the US overseas military activity.

The re-elected Bush Administration has apparently concluded that it has performed so well in its global war on terror that it doesn’t need China so badly anymore. During the first Bush term, China’s economic power and diplomatic leverage had grown so astonishingly that by the end of 2004 the US was returning to its 2001 frame of mind. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reactivated the late 1990s idea of containing China by building a Cold War-style quasi-military alliance with Asian democracies. By evoking portraying India in March to convey that America’s ‘newest foreign policy goal was to ‘help India become a major world power in the 21st century’. India, she meant, should open its market to the American arms industry and join the US as a ‘democratic ally’ to contain ‘Communist China’. Determining its own interests, New Delhi recently agreed with Beijing to settle their half-century-old border dispute and expand economic cooperation.

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China’s rise weighs on all states. China’s economic dynamism is a development for which the world’s main economies have waited a long time. China’s massive purchasing power in the global economy is the cornerstone of the so-called China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ was first presented by Pres. Hu’s foreign policy adviser Zhengan Bijnan at the ‘Bo-As Forum’ in Hainan, China’s version of the World Economic Forum, in November 2003.

China has a strategy to counter American containment. Chinese diplomats observen the fissures in the trans-Atlantic alliance caused by the Iraq War. Trade, investment and cultural relations between China and the European Union were already substantial, but strategic ties were lacking. Prior to the China-EU Summit in Beijing in October 2005, China issued a ‘EU Policy Paper’ that addressed, for the first time, strategic cooperation: ‘China and the EU will maintain high-level military-to-military exchanges, develop and improve, step by step, a strategic security consultation mechanism, exchange military experts, and expand exchanges in respect of military officers training and defence studies. The EU should lift its ban on arms sales to China at an early date so as to remove barriers to greater bilateral cooperation on defence industry and technologies.’

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