IDSS COMMENTARIES

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SOME CHINESE VIEWS ON FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS POST-SEPTEMBER 11

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Introduction

From 19-24 July 2002, a five-member delegation from IDSS undertook a week-long trip to China at the invitation of Prof. Wang Jisi, Vice Chairman of the Central Party School and the Director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who was the 2002 S. Rajaratnam Professor at IDSS. The group participated in a one-day workshop with leading Chinese security specialists organized by the China Reform Forum, and visited the Foreign Ministry and eight research institutions in Beijing and Shanghai, at which they conducted a series of seminars and discussions with Chinese officials, academics and policy analysts. The following is a brief report of their key findings.

General Chinese Foreign Policy Orientation Post-September 11

Terrorism

- Terrorism had become a central feature of the foreign policy discourse, as in many other countries.

- Chinese officials and analysts emphasized China's cooperation in the US war against terrorism. China had shared intelligence, supported the military strike against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and provided funding for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan

- The Chinese government had a shared interest against terrorism because it regarded terrorism as the key threat to national security. China had been dealing with the Xinjiang separatists who have transnational links to terrorist networks in Central Asian and other states. Chinese analysts noted that most terrorist organizations were associated with separatism and religion – e.g. Northern Ireland and Kashmir – and Xinjiang's case was not unusual.

- In the long run, China preferred a multipolar (as opposed to unipolar) system. In the Chinese definition, this would be a system that was not dominated by one hegemon, but characterized by a more equitable international order that took into account the diversity of the international system, and in which the voices of smaller states could be heard.

China-US Relations

There was a great diversity of views among Chinese scholars on the state of Sino-US relations. It would be a misnomer to speak of a single Chinese view.

Optimistic Views:

- China and the US now shared common interests on the basis of three 'antis': anti-terrorism, anti-proliferation, and anti-recession. China had declared its opposition to nuclear proliferation and wanted to cooperate with the US on this issue in the Korean peninsula and in South Asia.

- In the Asia-Pacific, China would not challenge the US military presence. Nor would it pressurize its neighbours to end their military relations with the US.

- China-US relations were stable and held no real points of conflict, except for the issue of Taiwan. China was a "satisfied" power and did not want to challenge the US for regional domination. Furthermore, China and the US were also coordinating on a range of regional security concerns such as the Korean peninsula and the Indian subcontinent.

- Regional conflicts did not now suffer the shadow of great power competition as they did during the Cold War. Asia-Pacific security was less attuned to the role of the great powers, so much so that US-China relations could be said to have ceased to be the key to regional security.

- Instead, the key problem in Sino-US relations was conceptual. It lay in the conflict between (a) the American 'China threat' mentality and portrayal of the relationship as one between superpower and rising challenger; as opposed to (b) China's perception of the relationship as one between developed and developing country.

Pessimistic Views

- Anti-terrorism could not be a war as the aim of destroying terrorism could not be ultimately achieved. The main impact of 9/11 lay in the changes it wrought in American perceptions and conceptions of the international order.

- American unilateralist and hegemonic impulses. Chinese analysts were critical about the way in which the Bush administration had extended the anti-terrorism campaign to include the goal of bringing about regime and leadership changes in other states by means of force; the branding of the 'axis of evil' states; the linking of anti-terrorism with the nuclear proliferation issue in Iraq; and the possible US military campaign in Iraq. Was the US pursuing a wider global strategy of dominance under the guise of counter-terrorism?

- Impacts of the war against terrorism on Chinese regional security concerns. There was some disquiet about the new American 'toehold' in Central Asia, in spite of US assurances that this military presence would only be for the short term. At the same time, there was some concern about the resurgence of a US military presence in Southeast Asia – why was the US supporting the Philippines government so strongly against the Abu Sayyaf, and how long could we expect US involvement to continue, and what type of military relationships might it lead to?

- Chinese analysts also pointed out that in spite of the new centrality of anti-terrorism, the Bush administration continued to be preoccupied with more

traditional security concerns such as the 'China threat' (as seen in the QDR), and with developing the National and Theater Missile Defense systems.

Chinese Policy Towards Southeast Asia

The Economic Imperative

- China's approach to Southeast Asia was driven by its economic imperative and its desire for the regional stability necessary to allow Beijing to concentrate on economic development policies at home.

- China was moving from a policy of 'peaceful coexistence' to one of 'peaceful co-prosperity' with ASEAN. As Vice President Hu Jintao indicated during his visit to Malaysia in April 2002, this was China's vision of a 'new regionalism'.

- Chinese analysts recognized, as do ASEAN countries, that Chinese economic growth presented both opportunities and challengers. Thus, China and ASEAN were "partners in competition" and "competitors in cooperation".

The 'China Threat'

- Chinese analysts were concerned about Southeast Asian perceptions of China as a threat. How prominent and salient was the 'China threat' mentality in the region? Against whom were the rising military procurements in Southeast Asia targeted?

- We observed that recent increases in military procurements in the region arose from a combination of factors: bilateral tensions; a resumption of procurement plans which were interrupted by the 1997 financial crisis; new threats such as piracy and drug smuggling; and hedging against strategic *uncertainty* rather than threats.

- We also drew attention to the fact that there was a difference in perceptions of China across the region, with certain countries viewing China with more suspicion than others. For instance, Vietnam and the Philippines were more wary of China because of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In terms of economic competition, most countries recognized that while China was a competitor, Chinese economic development also had positive growth effects for the region, and would create opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit.

The South China Sea

- Chinese officials and analysts agreed that China wanted to keep a "low profile" on the South China Sea disputes, and that Beijing would continue to seek cooperative dialogues at the bilateral and multilateral level.

- Chinese analysts pointed out that the slow progress on reaching agreement on a Code of Conduct was not due to Chinese intransigence, but due in part to disagreements amongst ASEAN countries about the scope and extent of such a code.

- We emphasized that agreement on a Code of Conduct would help significantly in mitigating Southeast Asian threat perceptions vis-à-vis China.

Chinese Perceptions of ASEAN

- In economic and political terms, one analyst went so far as to designate ASEAN as a 'pole' in the emerging multipolarity of the Asia-Pacific.

- Chinese officials and analysts agreed that ASEAN's leading role in regional institutions such as the ARF and ASEAN Plus Three was critical to China's comfortable participation. They wanted to see ASEAN continue in this role.

Chinese Attitudes Towards Multilateralism

Bilateralism and Multilateralism

- Chinese officials and analysts emphasized the importance of bilateral processes in Chinese foreign policy. Bilateral diplomacy formed the "basis" of multilateral approaches. The two forms of diplomacy were not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.

The ASEAN Regional Forum

- Chinese officials provided a remarkably positive assessment of the ARF, judging that it had made "incredible progress" since 1994.

- Chinese officials and some analysts presented a relatively passive attitude towards ideas about how to revitalize and develop the ARF. China was unlikely to take the initiative in proposing new measures for the ARF.

- They were generally in favour of the status quo, although there was willingness to consider some changes, such as the establishment of an ARF secretariat.

- There were more reservation on three suggestions:

    - That ASEAN should co-chair ARF summits with non-ASEAN countries. The Chinese concern was that this would dilute ASEAN leadership of the ARF, and opened up the possibility of the US or other western members undermining the 'ASEAN way'.

    - Defence ministers meetings. Chinese officials and analysts indicated that this might be difficult for logistical and bureaucratic reasons.

    - That the ARF moved towards a more 'problem-oriented' approach. Chinese officials were concerned that addressing specific 'problems' would allow what they considered to be sensitive domestic issues (such as Taiwan) to be brought up in the forum. This would breach ASEAN principles of sovereignty and non-interference.

The 10+3 Framework

- The 10+3 process could move faster than the ARF because it operated in an Asian way, with a higher level of comfort and because contentious issues were not discussed openly. But the Chinese government would be cautious in letting the 10+3 take on a security role since the ARF was there. Its free trade role was more important to China.

- Among the think-tanks, there was greater support for the 10+3 assuming a security role. The head of one think tank active in regional dialogues argued that the US presence in the ARF made China more reserved in discussing security issues in the Forum that have implications for sovereignty. Because of its limited membership, it would be easier for China to work within the 10+3 framework. China should push for the 10+3 to develop as a platform for dealing collectively with the US.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

- The SCO, comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgyzistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, was established to fight separatism, terrorism and extremism in Central Asia. Its activities included:

    - An anti-terrorism center

    - Joint intelligence gathering and sharing

    - Planning for coordinated military operations against separatists, extremists and terrorists. Although there were no current plans for deployment of Chinese troops to SCO member countries, China was willing to offer close military support to those who requested it under the SCO.

- China saw the SCO as an example of "a pooling of sovereignty" to establish confidence and tackle common security challenges. It could offer clues as to what kind of regional security cooperation China might prefer to undertake with its neighbours.