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China's non-alliance strategy: Facing the XXI century

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In 1982, China decided to start a non-alliance strategy that was considered to be one of the core policies of China's Diplomacy. But with the change of leadership in 2013, some debate surrounding this topic has been opened inside and outside China. This study will start by pointing out the innovations and continuities that China's new leadership has indicated as guidelines in Foreign Policy terms, and what changes may affect or be contradictory with this Non-Alliance Strategy. After this introduction, it will analyze the reasons why China adopted the Non-Alliance Strategy in 1982, and the historical, cultural concepts (such as Face (Mianzi) or Relationships (Guanxi)) and political elements that helped to reinforce it. The third part of this article will shed some light on the importance of the fact that this Non-Alliance Strategy is now being debated and how this debate is evolving.

Key words: Non-alliance strategy, China, diplomacy, innovation, continuity, Mianzi (面子), Guanxi (关系).

INTRODUCTION

This might sound paradoxical, but *China's New Diplomacy* is not a new thing. Actually the Diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been in constant evolution (especially since the period of Reform and Opening up), facing and adapting to national and international changes. Considering the dynamism of the world, of international affairs and China's own internal dynamism, stagnation is not a good strategy. It's better to be prepared, search for strategies to adapt or face changes, to avoid being carried away and lost in this constant movement. China has tried to react, adapt and evolve with this dynamism, not just from an economic or social perspective, but also, from a diplomatic point of view, trying to maintain a sense of consistency and continuity in her core principles. As Lu Shiwei summarizes it:

"Viewed as a whole, China's diplomacy in the new period shall be characterized as inheritance and development, demonstrating unity between innovation and continuity" (Shiwei, 2013).

One of the changes that seems to have been debated with the arrival of China's new leadership in 2013 is the so-called "non-alliance strategy", which started in 1982 and that has lasted till date. This study will start by presenting the changes and continuities included in *China's New Diplomacy*, and will continue by giving some light on the reasons why China embraced the non-alliance strategy. On the third part, some historical, cultural, political and even sociological background elements that, from the author's point of view, have helped to engage into this strategy for more than three

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decades, will be presented. The fourth point will shortly introduce the debate and voices of change that nowadays surround this strategy and point out the importance of the fact that this strategy is now being debated. In the end, some conclusions and future perspectives will be remarked.

The diplomacy of the new leadership: Equilibrating continuity and innovation

In October 2013, some weeks before the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's Third plenum, a working seminar on diplomacy took place in Beijing (Yan, 2014). This event (even though the media didn't pay a lot of attention to it) has been considered "the highest-level meeting on foreign affairs since 1949, because it was the first of its kind to have in attendance all the members of the Politburo's Standing Committee and all Politburo members in Beijing," (Yan, 2014) China's Ambassadors to important countries were also present. It was apparently in this meeting where the new leadership set up the working lines for China's new diplomatic strategy (Ranade, 2014).

Continuity

As noted in the introduction, besides change, there is also a sense of continuity and development related to the former diplomacy spirit. Core thinking ideas, fundamental goals and guiding principles remain the same (maintaining world peace, development, cooperation, mutual benefit, harmony, sovereignty, independence, security, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, not seeking hegemony). Also, the new leadership inherits some challenges like the need to balance the less developed western regions with the richer coastal areas. And its strategy is to give a new international perspective to it by developing the trade in those areas by opening them to its neighbors. The domestic perspective of the "Go-West" campaign started in the early 1990s, and its aim was to equilibrate the economic and social disparities between the coastal areas and the inner lands. Right now this "Go-West" campaign is being extrapolated to the westwards neighboring countries; "adding an international policy pillar to the "Go-West" drive which was previously regarded as a domestic endeavor" (Zhao, 2015).

Another important element that the new leadership bears in mind is the fact that in the last two decades, with a declining United States, the international balance of power is moving towards multipolarization. As a result, a "new round of geo-political and geo-economic competition between strategic powers" (Wang, 2014), is intensifying, and considering its fast rise, this main competitor of the US seems to be China. Washington

"rebalance to Asia" in the last decade has increased China's feeling of being encircled.¹ Some scholars, like Wang Jisi, have advocated for the "Marching Westwards Strategy", this means, opening new ways to break this feeling of encirclement, that could actually be seen as a more military or security related perspective of the already mentioned "Go-West" campaign:

"(...) presently the focus of the US strategy is "shifting eastwards", while the European Union, India, Russia and other countries are begging to "look eastwards". Located at the center of the Asia Pacific region, China should not limit its sights to its own coasts and borders, or to traditional competitors and partners, but should make strategic plans to "look westwards" and "march westwards" (Dong and Yin, 2014).

Another inherited objective is to keep improving China's image in the world, developing soft power and prove the "China threat feeling" wrong.

Innovation

Some of the most important changes that have been remarked are, for example, the fact, that China will start making a clear categorization between "friends" and "enemies". Until now, China was considered to have a neutral international position, operating with the basis of having no friends, and no enemies. This new categorization means that those countries that might be hostile to China might face sanctions and isolation (Yan, 2014).

This new conceptualization is also linked to a second change, this is, an increased emphasis in "peripheral diplomacy" (Ranade, 2014) which aim is to make the key neighboring countries feel safe and rebalance the "China threat" feeling, while emphasizing the following principles, "*Qin* (closeness), *cheng* (earnestness), *hui* (benefit) and *rong* (inclusiveness)" (Ranade, 2014). This strategy is also considered to help to generate a better environment to favor the path of China's internal development. Scholars that support that China should start acting like a global leader, like Yan Xuetong, consider that this "peripheral diplomacy" can be really beneficial for China. As Xi Jinping said:

"A close neighbor is better than a distant relative".

This policy has also been compared to what the US did in his rising moment by securing his "backyard", neighbor countries like Mexico and other Latin American countries, the so called Monroe Doctrine.

A third remarkable change is China's diplomacy shifting role from a "passive response" to a "taking initiative response". That is, China will start shaping rather than just integrating into the international system (Chen,

2014). As the foreign minister, Yang Jiechi said:

“Compared with the last Century, the international multilateral systems in the 21st century should expand representation, enhance fairness and strengthen efficiency. China is a participator in, builder of and contributor to the international systems. We shall take more active part in international affairs and play our due role to make the international systems fairer and more reasonable” (Lu, 2013).

A fourth transformation that had been perceived is that due to elements like energy security, environmental protection, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the traditional Chinese bilateral relationship model was becoming less suitable and less flexible, so Chinese diplomacy is becoming “less-country oriented and more multilateral and issue oriented” (Wang, 2011).

As it can be seen, keeping a balance between continuity and change it's not an easy task, as it requires maintaining a delicate equilibrium between, for example, “keeping a low profile” and “playing a due role”, that have generated debates not just among Chinese scholars and policy makers, but also inside Chinese society.

Why China chose a non-alliance strategy?

As it can be seen, three of these innovations (the one referring to start making a categorization between “friends” and “enemies”, the “peripheral diplomacy” and the idea of “taking initiative response”) seem to contradict, or somehow, modify one of the core strategies of China's foreign policy, the non-alliance strategy.

In contrast with previous agreements like the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* settled in 1954, China started a non-alliance policy in 1982 (Creutzfeldt, 2012). At this time, China, under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, was starting to develop a new period of Reforms and Openness (改革开放). From an official point of view, these are the reasons that supported this change to a non-alliance strategy:

1. Non-alliance can reduce friction between nations, while a positive global environment is beneficial to China's domestic economic social development.
2. Maintain world peace, lessen threat of war.
3. Protect China's sovereign independence, free from constraints imposed by others, and able to exchange friendship world-wide” (Li, 2012).

China at that point was starting a new era opening itself to world, and the lack of constraints that the *Non- Alliance* policy provided was thought to give flexibility to develop and grow without dependencies. Actually nowadays, some consider that while China's “peaceful development” continues to take place, this flexibility could still be convenient to keep on growing.

It should be noted that also, some elements and dimensions of Chinese culture, history and politics helped to the development and reinforcement of this strategy. From a historical point of view, the break of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the approach to the US during the Cold War, is an example that could confirm the common Chinese saying:

“There are no friends forever, but also there aren't enemies forever” (没有永远的朋友 · 也没有永远的敌人).

China also had terrible memories of the so called “century of humiliation” that showed the worst and most dark side of international dependencies and made her suspicious on international alliances.

The US-PRC relationship is an example of how your today's friend can be your tomorrow's enemies, and also how your today's enemies can be your tomorrow's friends. After the US helped Chiang Kai-Shek during the civil war, and after the indirect conflicts between these two countries, like the Korean War or the Vietnam War, finally in 1979 the US officially recognized the PRC, and more fluid relations started. But after the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989 and the Soviet Union fall, the suspicion darkens this relationship again. The 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis and the 1999 NATO Bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade did not help to improve the situation (Peter Hays Gries, 2005).

It was not until the 2001, with the September 11 eleven attacks, when China offered its help on the war against terrorism, that the diplomatic relation improved (US Department of State, 2013). But even nowadays, when relations between them seem to be stabilized, China still perceives with suspicion how the US mood towards the PRC experiences fluctuations depending on “national” and “electoral” interests. For example, despite the close relationship between US-China (the so called *Tangled Titans* linked into a *Coopetition* relationship (David Shambaugh, 2012)), during the electoral campaigns of the candidates in the USA, regarding China, they tend to privilege the discourse that they consider that the public opinion will prefer, even if that implies publicly criticizing China. And also, they keep on maintaining a double faced relationship in some delicate topics such as Taiwan or the South China Sea.

Another historical factor that helped to the development of the Non-Alliance Strategy is that Chinese scholars usually hold the idea that history does not always follow the same trends, but it might be useful for the future to learn some lessons from the past (Schweller and Pu, 2014). Following this historical perspective, Chinese scholars tend to think about US international relations isolationist and non-interventionist strategy during its rising period by the late XIX century and early XX century. During this time, the US followed George Washington's warning against permanent alliances for any cause:

"It would be unwise (...) to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in ordinary vicissitudes of her [European] politics, or the ordinary combination and collisions of her friendship or enemies. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different cause" (Washington's Farewell Address, September 17, 1876).

This consideration opens again an interesting space to debate about the flexibility and positive factors of not being engaged into alliance constraints, especially during a developing/rising period. From a more theoretical perspective of International Relations, it's important to consider that for a long time the most predominant School of International Relations in China is the realist one. This school emphasizes the importance of power, self-interest and a Hobbesian perspective of world affairs. And regarding International Alliances, it considers that it's better not to trust anybody and that "alliances are a source of conflict between states. They can lead to intrigue and rivalry" (Griffiths et al., 2013).

Finally, from a cultural perspective there are two Chinese concepts that help to understand the reinforcement of this *Non-Alliance Strategy* in the PRC's diplomacy. These are the concepts of "Face" or *Mianzi* (面子) and "Relationship" or *Guanxi* (关系). The concept of "Face" refers to the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself, and from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct (Yau-Fai, 1976).

China in its actual position in the world (in which she usually perceives herself as a second power), needs to keep its face in front of the international community, because somehow maintaining face means maintaining authority (Gries, 2005). And also because as some countries perceive China's rising as a threat, keeping its face can help to improve the perception that other countries have of her, and therefore, balance these threatening perceptions. But, how can we link *face* with the non-alliance policy? The PRC it's aware that she might be judged by her relations and by the countries that she is usually related to, this means that some relationships can be sacrificed in order to "save face", because the desire to maintain face can act as both a barrier to and a facilitator of social interaction (Gries, 2005).

A non-alliance policy can be a useful tool to maintain face in front of the international community, this neutral position can avoid that the links that she might have with ostracized countries like North Korea could affect its international position or could imply a loss of face (失面子), and therefore a loss of authority and reputation or prestige (脸面). To be more specific, for example, China knows that the US might use China-North Korea relations to criticize its policies and make her loose prestige in front of the international community, but an official *Non-*

Alliance Policy can be a good neutralizer of these criticisms.

The idea of "relationship" sometimes also translated as "connections" or *Guanxi* it's really important in Chinese society from a family to a business level:

"Guanxi refers to the benefits gained from social connections and usually extends from extended family, school friends, workmates and members of common clubs or organizations. It is customary for Chinese people to cultivate an intricate web of *guanxi* relationships, which may expand in a huge number of directions, and includes lifelong relationships. Staying in contact with members of your network is not necessary to bind reciprocal obligations. Reciprocal favors are the key factor to maintaining one's *guanxi* web, while failure to reciprocate is considered an unforgivable offense (that is, the more you ask of someone, the more you owe them). *Guanxi* can perpetuate a never-ending cycle of favors" (Pierre, 2009)

The connection between *Mianzi* and *Guanxi*, relies in a moral obligation to maintain and respond to this "relationship" when it's time to. Failing to do this will imply a "losing face". As it has been mentioned earlier, *Guanxi* is usually related to business and family sphere, but as part of Chinese culture it has effects in International Relations. Actually the Chinese translation of international relations is *Guoji Guanxi* (国际关系), it contains the concept of *Guanxi* on it. This emphasizes a more utilitarian point of view, and reinforces the idea that holding more flexible bilateral relations instead of strong alliances reduces the chances of "losing face".

But as it will be seen in the next point, the new debate regarding alliances is changing the conception that alliances can have a negative effect on China's International Relations, remarking that an Alliance Strategy could help China to "gain face", that is, authority and prestige in front of the International Community.

The current debate on the non-alliance strategy and its importance

With the arrival of China's new leadership, China's role on the International Community has been really debated, and its *Non-Alliance Policy* is one of the elements set on this debate. Some consider that China as a "developing country" should keep the independence and flexibility that the *Non-Alliance Policy* provides. These voices agree with Deng Xiaoping considerations and the importance of keeping a low profile on International Relations:

"Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile..., never take the lead but aim to do something big".

At the same time other voices have started pointing out that China should start playing a bigger role on the

International sphere and therefore start an *Alliance Strategy*. One example is Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, who some consider as the funder of the Chinese Realism, The Tsinghua School of International Relations. Regarding the non-alliance principle he argues:

“At this point in time they are debating in China whether we should abandon the non- alliance principle, which stipulates we do not make promises to anyone. Without offering any promises, there is no way to test your credibility. You promise nothing, so you do not need to meet any specific expectations. You can never know whether such a country has credibility or not, whether that country is reliable or not. If China wants to be a world power and play the role of the leading power then China has to make alliances. Without alliances you can never have close relations with other countries, and certainly can never have more good friends than the US. The US makes alliances, China doesn't. You can't find any country in the world that says, 'we have more close friends than the United States,' because there is no country that makes more alliances. Secondly, because the US makes alliances and makes promises to its allies, we can know how reliable or unreliable they are. When they don't keep their promises their allies aren't happy. That's why I argue that at this moment for China to become a humane authority, it needs to consider giving up its non-alliance principle” (Creutzfeldt, 2012).

Li Daguang, from China National Defense University, following this idea, considers that stablishing solid international relations helps to increase country's soft power. And he uses the US as an example of this:

“America has many allies globally, from financial partners to reliable political, military alliances, providing information, resources, and support. The US allies sometimes speak on its behalf, even act on its behalf. The ebb and flow of these alliances is very meaningful in analyzing America's projection of power and strategic intent” (Li, 2012).

Yan Xuetong and Li Daguang point relies on an increase of credibility, prestige (maybe this will sound contradictory but it's also a way to “gain face” and therefore authority) and soft power, in front of the International community. Also, other views that consider that Great Powers alliances can provide strategic advantage with respect to their actual or potential enemies (Griffiths, 2012) tend to focus on the importance of starting an *Alliance Strategy*, pointing to security reasons:

“History of the world tells us that, whether it's in political, economic or military arenas, Western nations, without any exception, always resorted to alliances,” said one

Chinese security analyst. “China must change its non-alliance policy,” he said. “We must consider forming alliances. Otherwise, in a future war with the U.S., we will not be able to politically or militarily counter America's global alliance network just by ourselves.” “Without an alliance system of our own,” he said, “we will never be able to win” (Farah, 2012).

On the other hand, the US has also entered into this debate, and “complains that China wants enhanced prestige but not the responsibilities that global leaders are obligated to perform,” (Randall and Xiaoyu, 2012) and, in its own words, they want China to be a “responsible stake-holder” in the system, not (as they tend to perceive her) a free-rider (Randall and Xiaoyu, 2012). This considerations and its interest in the PRC taking a bigger role in International Relations is usually perceived by some in the PRC as an American strategy to contain China's rising. Actually, while the US pushes China to get further responsibilities in an international level, it seems to forget that in their own past, as we mentioned before, they also used a non-alliance strategy. During the 1930s, while Britain was in decline, the United States demanded more prestige, but at the same time unwilling to accept the global responsibilities.

Roughly the same problem exists today and, if this scenario plays out, will persist in the future. The United States complains that China wants enhanced prestige but not the responsibilities that global leaders are obligated to perform. While some Western observers argue that China must be coerced into taking appropriate actions when global crises arise, it is useful to recall that the United States accepted leadership of the system commensurate with its actual power only after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, and in the aftermath of World War II, when it emerged as the only victor (Randall and Xiaoyu, 2012). Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson also analyzed this ambivalence in American thought in the early stages of its development:

“The great dilemma of Jefferson's statecraft lay in his apparent renunciation of the means on which states had always ultimately relied to ensure their security and to satisfy their ambitions, and his simultaneous unwillingness to renounce the ambitions that normally led to the use of these means. He wished, in other words, America could have it both ways – that it could enjoy the fruits of power without falling victim to the normal consequences of its exercise” (Robert and Hendrickson, 1990).

CONCLUSION

China's *Non-Alliance Strategy* that started in 1982 has interesting roots: historical lessons, strategic interests and ideological, theoretical and cultural elements. One of

the main points is still that it gives an important degree of flexibility and strategic independence to China's development. But of course the development of new voices claiming for the importance of engagement on formal alliances should be followed carefully, especially considering the changes and impact that these could imply in China's International Relations policies and image.

It is difficult to calculate how far will this debate go and what chances to change the actual non-alliance strategy, especially considering how delicate (and sometimes contradictory) is the topic and how complicated Beijing's foreign Policy and decision making is, the multiple actors and interests that it includes and the cultural elements that it involves. But it's really interesting that people from academia, like the well-known scholar Yan Xuetong, have stepped into this debate, because they are an actual part of the actors that can influence foreign policy in China (Rozman, 2013), and therefore they can affect policy making. As Jakobson and Knox (2010) point out:

"Many ministries lack the expertise needed to deal with challenges that have accompanied the active international expansion. Consequently, when deliberating policy decisions, China's top leaders consult researches, leading intellectuals and senior media representatives (Jakobson and Knox, 2010). So, the door for change, or at least for debate, might be slightly or ready to open.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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ⁱ For example, ""Bian Qingzhu, a senior strategic analyst and research fellow affiliated with the Peace and Development Research Center under the State Council, believed that U.S. military exercises in sensitive areas in the Asia Pacific Region were like "Xiang Zhuang performing the sword dance as a cover for his attempt on Liu Bang's life."" Extracted from Wang Dong and Chengzhi Yin, "Great Power Competition" paper presented in 7th Berlin Conference on Asian Security: Territorial Issues in Asia Drivers, Instruments, Ways Forward. Berlin, July 1-3, 2013.

ⁱⁱ This might seem contradictory with the last comments about Mianzi, but as mentioned before, Mianzi can act as a facilitator or an obstacle to interaction, in this case, it's perceived as facilitator.