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## China's rise can be peaceful

By Brendan O'Reilly  
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The intelligence community of the United States has acknowledged that, within two decades, the country will no longer be the world's sole hegemon. "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds", written by the National Intelligence Council of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, provides forecasts of important global developments over the next 20 years. One of the most vital passages of this report details how China is almost certain to overcome the United States as the world's largest economic power sometime before 2030.

However, the report predicted that no other single power will rise up to take the place of the United States: "With the rapid rise of other countries, the 'unipolar moment' is over and no country - whether the US, China, or any other country - will be a hegemonic power." [1]

This prediction of a multipolar world was somewhat tempered by another key phrase in the report: "China's power has consistently increased faster than expected".

The US intelligence community acknowledges that China and the US may emerge as rough equals over the coming years - but at the same time, China has consistently surpassed previous expectations of economic, political, and military progress.

Of course, the projections of the US Intelligence community must be taken with a grain of salt. Remember, these are the same organizations that could not foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union or the 9/11 attacks. Many of these "experts" were warning of the dire threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction in 2002. Nevertheless, "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds" has taken into account some solid analysis of ongoing global developments.

While the report is no doubt shaped by the worldview of mainstream Washington, the overall trends it documents are fairly clear. Humanity will be living in an increasingly multipolar environment - and an increasingly Chinese world.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei specifically addressed the conclusions of this U.S intelligence report. Hong promised an eternally benevolent China:

China will unswervingly pursue a way of peaceful development. China's development aims at making greater contributions toward peace and development of mankind, as well as a happy life for its people, instead of overwhelming others or scrambling for world dominance. [2]

This theme of China's inherently peaceful and mutually beneficial rise is common in Chinese political and popular discourse. Chinese people often contrast the foreign policy of their country with the meddling and aggression that they believe has been inherent in other hegemonic powers.

Indeed, the assertion of China remaining largely peaceful during times of great Chinese power is to some degree grounded in historic realities. China's leaders have traditionally focused on the huge task of maintaining domestic political and social stability in the vast and populous Middle Kingdom.

Foreign nations were usually left to their own affairs - provided they symbolically acknowledged China as the "elder brother" through annual gifts to the emperor. Trade took precedence over military engagements. In both ancient and modern times, China's military adventures have been largely confined to China's immediate borders. These conflicts saw China counteracting perceived threats to the Chinese mainland, as well as slowly expanding the empire's frontiers.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei also attempted to downplay predictions of China's coming preeminence: "Despite the remarkable achievements made since reform and opening-up, China is still the world's biggest developing country and has a long way to go in realizing socialist modernization. We have a clear understanding of that." [3]

This de-emphasis of China's growing strength has been a consistent feature of Chinese foreign policy for several decades. Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader who led his people into the modern economic system, famously advised his subordinates to "Hide your capability and bide your time". After all, time was (and is) on China's side. China is likely to become the world's most powerful nation long before anyone realizes it - including the Chinese themselves.

### **How to survive PaxSinica**

The world's major powers - especially the United States - can take concrete measures to ensure that China's rise is not accompanied by dangerous and unpredictable confrontation. First and foremost, one must avoid insults to China's perception of "face". An increasingly powerful China is impatient to earn what it sees as its rightful place as a fully respected member of the international community.

The Chinese emphasis on respect means that Western (and especially US) criticism of China's internal political structure are in all probability counterproductive. The war in Iraq, the official use of torture, and Washington's ongoing support for despotic regimes have effectively rendered

US criticism of Chinese policies obsolete in the eyes of most of the world's population.

Moreover, one could imagine the domestic political reaction if China started condemning America's procedures on domestic surveillance or the "No Fly List". In all likelihood, such criticism would actually reinforce the controversial US policies, because American leaders would want to demonstrate their independence in the face of malignant foreign pressure.

Furthermore, any US attempt to create a "North Atlantic Treaty Organization of the East" to jointly resist Chinese territorial claims is almost guaranteed to backfire. The Chinese government and public - in both the mainland and on Taiwan - see the disputed territories of the South China Sea and Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as integral parts of the Chinese nation.

Therefore US backing for Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam is seen as a threat to China's territorial integrity. China's leaders can maintain a tough stance in these territorial disputes, while at the same time championing "peaceful development" precisely because, in Chinese eyes, these territories are simply another part of China.

Finally, if concerned powers want to keep a rising China peaceful, they must encourage China's economic growth and political stability. "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds" specifically warned, "many experts believe a democratic China could also be more nationalistic... historical parallels with other great power rises suggest that Chinese assertiveness might increase as its economic growth slows and there is political need at home to demonstrate China's standing in the world." [4]

China's current leadership earns its legitimacy through the continued ability to improve the standard of living for the Chinese people. Any major threats to this dynamic could unleash military conflicts to define China's borders. Remember, China's leaders remain internally focused. A war over islands in the South China Sea would be less about the islands themselves and more about the need to unite the populace against a foreign enemy.

There are signs that the United States and China can accommodate a major shift in the balance of world power without resorting to antagonism. Recent talks at the Pentagon between Jim Miller, US undersecretary of defense for policy, and Qi Jianguo, deputy chief of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, are a sign of mutually respectful military-to-military ties.

Furthermore, at a recent meeting with former US president Jimmy Carter, Xi called for the two powers to "accumulate positive energy". At this meeting, US Ambassador to China Gary Locke hailed the potential for US-China cooperation: "Many global issues cannot and will not be resolved without cooperation and the joint partnership of the United States and China. Working in those ways, we can certainly move away from mistrust and build trust." [5]

Conflict can be avoided if the United States respects China and China avoids stoking US fears. There is little history of animosity between the two powers. For most of the last century, China and America were allies, first against Japanese imperialism and then against Soviet influence. Furthermore, there are vast avenues for cooperation between the two powers on issues ranging from global climate change to counter-terrorism, international finance, and maritime security.

So long as China is stable, increasingly prosperous, and most importantly, internationally respected, there is little cause for the US to fear sharing the responsibilities of a global superpower with China. However, it remains to be seen whether America's leaders are willing to accommodate China as an equal - much less as an esteemed Elder Brother.

***Notes:***

1. Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds, The National Intelligence Council, NIC 2012-001.
2. China stresses peaceful development after US report, China Daily, December 12, 2012.
3. Ibid.
4. Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds, The National Intelligence Council, NIC 2012-001.
5. Xi pursues better ties between China, US, China Daily, December 14, 2012.