

5th Europe-Northeast Asia Forum  
The Taiwan Strait and Northeast Asian Security  
Berlin, 15-17 December 2005

*A conference jointly organised by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, the Korean Institute for International Studies (KIIS), Seoul, and the Federal Ministry of Defence, Berlin*

Discussion Paper  
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Chinas Choice for "Peaceful Rise":  
The Emergence of Realistic Nationalism and its Implications  
for the Taiwan Issue

by

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One of the most interesting domestic developments in the People's Republic of China was the tentative closing of the debate over the idea of China's "peaceful rise" (Zhongguo de heping jueqi). In the fall of this year, Zheng Bijian, creator of this theory and one of the most powerful confidants of President Hu Jintao, published an article with the title "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status" in the American "Foreign Affairs" (September/October 2005), suggesting internationally that the lengthy national debate over the strategic direction of the country in global affairs was coming to an end.

### The Decision for "Peaceful Rise"

Two years ago, in November 2003, Zheng Bijian addressed this strategic topic at the Bo'ao Forum for Asia and introduced the idea of "China's peaceful rise". Since then this concept has been the topic of a fierce debate among Chinese intellectuals and politicians. As early as in March 2004, it looked through as if the idea of "peaceful rise" was going to be a new grand strategy of the government under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. During a press conference on March 14, 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao announced that the concept of "peaceful rise" should include at least five "essentials" (yaoyi):

1. it [the peaceful rise] would involve taking advantage of world peace to promote China's development and safeguarding world peace through China's development;
2. It would be based on China's own strength and independent hard work;
3. it could not be achieved without continuing the "opening up policy" and an active set of international trade and economic exchanges;
4. It would take several generations; and
5. It would "not stand in the way of any other country or pose a threat to any other country, or be achieved at the expense of any particular nation."<sup>1</sup>

However, after the announcement of Wen Jiabao the term "peaceful rise" had disappeared from the official political language. Top politicians returned to the term "peace and development" which was formulated by Deng Xiaoping as the tenet of China's foreign policy. There were allegations that former President Jiang Zemin was not contented with the notion of "peaceful rise" and insisted on a continued using of the term "peace and development".

Until the fall of this year, nobody was sure whether the idea of "peaceful rise" could be revitalized. Zheng Bijian's article in the "Foreign Affairs" has solved this riddle. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have prevailed in the controversy and turned out to be the winner of the strategic debate.

Indeed, the Chinese leadership has only currently decided for the choice of "peaceful rise" as a long term strategy for China's foreign and security policy. It is only after the November 2005 APEC summit in South Korea that Chinese top politicians began again to actively to use the term "peaceful rise". This fact presents that the political consensus between the advocates and opponents of this strategy was just achieved several weeks ago.

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<sup>1</sup> These "essentials" were summed up by Robert L. Suettinger: The Rise and Descent of „Peaceful Rise“, in: [www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/2004/rs.pdf](http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/2004/rs.pdf) (25/01/2005).

Obviously instructed by the Politburo, Zheng Bijian published on November 22 a comment in Renmin Ribao with the title “Development Direction of the Chinese Communist Party in the Twenty First Century” (zhongguo gongchandang zai 21 shiji de zouxiang), outlining the real “essences” of the new strategy. In comparison with the announcement made by Wen Jiabao in 2004, Zheng Bijian’s this year’s explaining seems to be more sharply focusing and more precise. “The key idea of the current domestic und foreign policy of the CCP”, Zheng argued, “is to strive for peace towards outside (duiwai mouqiu heping); to strive for harmony within the country (duinei mouqiu hexie), and to strive for conciliation regarding to Taiwan situation (dui taihai jushi mouqiu hejie).

### The Concept of “Peaceful Rise” and Chinese Nationalism

Generally speaking, the strategic choice for “peaceful rise” is a victory of the realistic nationalism. In my opinion, the current nationalism in China can be divided into four streams: the traditionalistic nationalism, the liberal nationalism, the pragmatic nationalism, and the realistic nationalism. What all the four nationalistic streams have in common is their bitterness over Chinas humiliation in the past and their decisiveness to recreate a leading power status for China. They all seem to believe that Chinese interests could only be served by a “rich and strong” Chinese state.

The traditionalistic nationalism regards the imperialistic intrusions in China as the main reason for the country’s decline and demands a reduction of foreign influences in China. Their supporters are often hostile to strangers and remain acutely sensitive to any perceived offences by foreigners. Traditionalistic nationalism insists on recreating a strong Chinese state by renewing the Chinese culture and traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The liberal nationalism demands to renovate China through political and social reforms. However, they have a double character. They are nationalistic because they do identify with the Chinese state as a countering power against pressures of outside forces on China; they are liberal, however, because they advocate political participation as an effective instrument to curb the authoritarian state, arguing that China could be only really renewed by introduction of liberal democracy.

Thus politically the liberal nationalism is extremely sceptical towards the United States and Japan, suspecting them of preventing China from rising to a great power. They often criticize the Chinese government for being too weak and too reluctant to defend Chinese national interests, and ask the communist regime to do more to back up its pledge to protect Chinese national unity and integrity. At the same time they are not satisfied with the authoritarian system, and ask for more participating opportunities for Chinese citizen in policy making process. The CCP is being accused of monopolizing foreign policy making and being less assertive towards America and Japan.<sup>3</sup>

The pragmatic nationalism considers modernization and industrialization of the country as the only possibility to recreate a strong Chinese state. They find the best way of making China rich and strong is to cooperate with the Western countries and Japan. It is their strategy to acquire economic, technical, and financial supports from the US, EU, as well as Japan by not overly talking about Chinas national ambitions. In actuality, pragmatic nationalism has been reluctant to openly demonstrate Chi-

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Suisheng: Pragmatismus und Parolen. Gefährdet der Nationalismus Chinas friedlichen Aufschwung? In: Internationale Politik, 12/2005, pp. 24-30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.27.

nas power and power potential towards outside. In regard of relations between state and citizens pragmatic nationalism emphasizes the necessity to centralize state power, arguing that the objective of becoming a rich and strong power could be only achieved under a strong leadership with highly limited political participation for the masses.

So far, the pragmatic nationalism has played a dominating role in the Chinese politics, embodied by the CCP party authoritarian state and strongly driven by powerful political leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. However, pragmatic nationalism began to change, at latest after Jiang Zemin's stepping down. Indeed, the decision of the current Chinese leaders for the strategy of "peaceful rise" marked clearly the birth of a new type of Chinese nationalism: the realistic nationalism.

Realistic nationalism is immediately derived from the pragmatic nationalism, but seems to be more down-to-earth in assessing China's real status and its relations with other powers. Indeed, it is a new development of Chinese nationalism distinct from pragmatic nationalism in following three points:

First, we can draw a distinction between pragmatic nationalism and realistic nationalism by looking into their attitude towards China's ambitions in the world politics. Pragmatic nationalism shows a bigger modesty in talking about the abilities and achievements of the country. They remain still loyal to Deng Xiaoping who taught the Chinese elite to "hide one's capacities and bide one's time" (taoguang yanghui).

Therefore, they are extremely cautious about the way they talk about China's intentions and ambitions. They prefer to use the term "peace and development" rather than "peaceful rise" to describe China's growth in power and influences. They express strong anxieties over possible misgivings from Western countries when China overly talking about "rise". Is it right, they ask, to use the word "rise" at all, since it might cause the wary to draw parallels with the rise of Germany or Japan? Does not the history of the last century suggest the rise of big powers inevitably leads them into conflict with other powers?<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to pragmatic nationalism, realistic nationalism finds it no more necessary to hide China's ambition to rise to a big power. For them China is already a global player, although the process of "rising" has been not yet completed. From their views of point the crucial question for China is not how to leave the world in the dark about China's real ambition, but how to persuade the established powers to believe that China's rising would not jeopardize their interests and status. Realistic nationalism is revisionism to Deng Xiaoping in that it is no more prepared to adhere to his teaching "hide one's capacities and bide one's time".

The second distinction that we could make between pragmatic nationalism and realistic nationalism is their attitude towards the existing international order which is characterized by the hegemonic status of the United States as the only superpower in the world politics. Pragmatic nationalism feels extremely uncomfortable with the American hegemony and has never really abandoned the idea to create a multi-polar structure to replace the Pax Americana.

However, realistic nationalism is demonstrating the will to accept the existing political and economic order dominated by the United States. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to contend that the current Chinese leaders were prepared to subordi-

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<sup>4</sup> For pragmatic nationalistic arguments see „Even when China is trying hard to be conciliatory, it scares its neighbours, in: The Economist, June 24<sup>th</sup> 2004, [http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=2792533](http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displayStory.cfm?story_id=2792533).

nate China to American leadership. But they do seem to accept the hegemonic stability generated by the political, economic and military arrangements of the United States, showing strong interests to benefit from it.

At least the choice for “peaceful rise” is sending a signal demonstrating their interest to accommodate itself to U.S. leadership in the world. As Zheng Bijian has explicitly stressed, “The CCP is not willing to challenge the existing international order, much less has it the desire to break it by using violent forces.”<sup>5</sup> In this regard realistic nationalists do seem to be less revisionist towards the current world system and more interested to maintain status quo than pragmatic nationalists flirting with the idea of generating a new political and economic order in the world.

Third and finally, Chinese nationalism, particularly pragmatic nationalism, has been unable to find an approach to effectively deal with foreign concerns about growing Chinese power. The theory of “China-Threat” has been pervasive. So far, the pragmatic nationalism of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin have not managed to convince Western sceptics. Their argument that China would still remain a developing country and have absolutely no desire to perform a hegemonic role in the region and beyond has produced little effect. That such argument does not work in the West facing a China growing stronger and stronger everyday is self-evident.

Against this background the “peaceful rise” notion could be read as an offer of Chinese realistic nationalism to the West: “You let me rise to a big power, and I give you my promise not to overthrow the order that you have established.” This offer is obviously based on a realistic recognition that it is normal that a rising power be usually perceived as a threat to the existing status quo and Chinas “rise” could fail if it would not try to accommodate itself to the order shaped by other global players. What realistic nationalism characterizes is its understanding that it is unavoidable for China to pay a big price for international acceptance of its rising. This understanding could be read as a formula “peace for rise”, something that Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin have never offered, at least not so explicitly.

### Implications for Taiwan

This big price to have to pay for China to ensure its “rising” could be an adjusting of its current Taiwan policy. Since, Taiwan issue is the only international area where Beijing has threatened to use military forces if its diplomacy and policy failed. I can hardly image that China could successfully complete its transition process to global power status in a peaceful manner if it tried to attack the democratic island. The argument of Chinese traditionalistic nationalism that Taiwan was a Chinese internal issue and therefore should be excluded from the project of “peaceful rise” seems to misjudge the complex international character of the Taiwan conflict, both politically and militarily.

Indeed, the realistic nationalism around Hu Jintao does not exclude Taiwan issue from the concept of “peaceful rise”. In contrast to the demands of traditionalistic nationalism realistic nationalism has explicitly introduced the Taiwan issue into the concept. As above noted, one of the three essences of the strategy of “peaceful rise” is to strive for conciliation regarding to Taiwan situation (*dui taihai jushi mouqiu hejie*). By doing so, the Chinese government has obviously consciously subordinated the Taiwan issue to long-term goal of “peaceful rise”. That could possibly mean that the process of “peaceful rise” would not be considered as completed if “conciliation”

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<sup>5</sup> Zheng Bijian: *Zhongguo gongchandang zai 21 shiji de zouxiang*, (Development Direction of the Chinese Communist Party in the Twenty First Century), in: *Renmin Ribao*, November 22, 2005.

with Taiwan would have not been achieved. From this perspective I would venture to expect three changes in the Chinese Taiwan policy, even through these changes could only take place slowly:

Firstly, it is true that Beijing will not openly abandon its reunification policy, but this policy will probably give way to a policy aimed at creating a *modus vivendi* between the both sides of the Taiwan-Strait. This *modus vivendi* could be a treaty or an agreement with the Taiwanese authority capable to grant a peaceful co-existence for some decades; as a result, the concept “one country two systems” would probably diminish.

Secondly, Beijing would intensify its efforts to persuade Washington to work together with him in creating necessary pressures to what it calls “separating forces” in Taiwan. For these purpose, it would be likely that Beijing will spend more time and resources to achieve a fundamental understanding with the United States about Taiwan issue. Therefore, it would be not impossible that Beijing be prepared to abandon using forces if Taiwan pledged to forgo independence based on an effective U.S. mediation. The logic of “peaceful rise” would make it easier for Beijing to go this way.

Thirdly, Beijing would increasingly use Taiwanese democracy to prevent it from becoming independent. Chinese leaders seem to have already realized the advantages of democracy for their national project. They are obviously very much aware of the fact that Taiwan could not be able to declare independent if the “Pan-Green-Alliance” did not achieve a three fourth majority in the parliament necessary for constitutional amends.

As long as the anti-independent “Pan-Blue-Alliance” can maintain support from about 50 percent of voters, Beijing is happy. From this reason Chinese leaders will intensify their dialogue and cooperation with the opposition parties in Taiwan, hoping they could hold the DPP in check. On the other hand the CCP is forced to behaviour more generously in terms of reduction of political, military and diplomatic pressure to Taiwan in order to enhance the credibility of their “blue partners” in the views of Taiwanese voters. Therefore, I am expecting a diminishing of Chinese open intimidation with attack threat against Taiwan.

## Conclusion

The strategic choice for “peaceful rise” is a victory of the realistic nationalism over pragmatic nationalism. It has revised Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy testament in terms of “hide ones’s capacities and bide one’s time”, demonstrating that the new Chinese leaders have become more self-conscious and assertive towards the west countries. On the other hand, by pledging not to challenge the “existing international order” the Chinese government has enhanced its chance to be accepted as a rising power by the U.S. EU and Japan. In this regard, CCP’s concept of “peaceful rise” can be read as an offer of Chinese realistic nationalism to the West: “You let me rise to a big power, and I give my promise to you not to overthrow the order that you have established.” If Beijing takes this deal seriously, a decrease of tensions in the Taiwan-Strait is to be expected. The logic of “peaceful rise” will force the Chinese elite to seek for a *modus vivendi* with Taiwan in order to not jeopardize Chinas transition to global big power status.