

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINA’S CONTEMPORARY FOREIGN POLICY

Cui Fenghao

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

Independent Researcher

Abstract: *This article examines the geopolitical aspects of the foreign policy of the People’s Republic of China in the 21st century. It analyzes the key directions and priorities of China’s foreign policy strategy at both global and regional levels, including economic expansion, energy security and the expansion of political influence. The article also explores the main factors shaping China’s foreign policy, including changes in the global balance of power, strategic competition with the United States, and China’s interests in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa.*

Keywords: *China’s foreign policy, geopolitics, 21st century, Belt and Road Initiative, global strategy, regional security, economic diplomacy, multipolar world, Central Asia, international relations.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, international relations have undergone profound transformations driven by shifts in the balance of power, the intensification of global interdependence, and growing competition among leading centres of power. Against this backdrop, China occupies a particularly prominent position, having evolved over recent decades into one of the key actors in global politics and the world economy. The intensification of China’s foreign policy activity has been accompanied by the formulation of a new strategy that combines elements of economic expansion, political influence, and geostrategic planning.

China’s geopolitical priorities encompass a broad range of regions, including the Asia-Pacific, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring energy security, developing transport corridors, and strengthening political and economic cooperation with developing countries. In this context, the study of the geopolitical dimensions of China’s foreign policy makes it possible to identify key trends in the transformation of the global system and to outline the prospects for the further development of international relations.

DISCUSSION

In analyzing the foundations of China’s foreign policy at the present stage, a number of factors must be taken into account. First, over the last two decades of the

twentieth century, China’s role in global politics and the world economy increased significantly and underwent substantial transformation. The country’s achievements have attracted heightened scholarly and political interest, as they are directly linked to the development strategy it has pursued, which serves as an alternative to liberal models.

Second, China’s foreign policy is, to a considerable extent, conservative in nature, as its core principles have remained largely unchanged over the past fifty years (particularly with regard to issues of state sovereignty and the fundamentals of interstate relations). At the same time, it should be emphasized that following the reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s, China’s foreign policy course differed fundamentally from that of the Cultural Revolution period. Notably, even prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Chinese leadership had developed an effective paradigm for engagement with the external world. This paradigm proved fully viable under the crisis-prone international environment of the 1990s.

The contemporary direction of China’s foreign policy is grounded in a pragmatic interpretation of prevailing international realities. One of the key factors is the emergence of a unipolar model of international relations, обусловленное the significant lead of the United States in economic and military-political spheres. At the same time, globalization processes encompassing the global system have led to a substantial increase in the role of economic factors in the competition among leading powers. Taking these circumstances into account, the leadership of the People’s Republic of China has formulated strategic approaches to foreign policy aimed at ensuring the country’s sustainable development and strengthening its sovereignty.

At the same time, the concept of an emerging “multipolar” or “polycentric” world is becoming increasingly dominant in assessments of the international environment. China interprets the trend toward multipolarity as a manifestation of a fundamental transformation of the system of international relations. From Beijing’s perspective, this process reflects an evolutionary transition from the traditional paradigm of the balance of power to a new geopolitical configuration grounded in the primacy of national interests.

This conceptual approach occupies a central place in China’s contemporary foreign policy doctrine, shaping its strategic vision of a new architecture of international relations. According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the institutionalization of the principle of multipolarity within the system of international law and diplomatic practice is leading to a profound structural

transformation of the global order¹. This paradigmatic shift opens up opportunities for China to strengthen its position as an influential actor in global politics.

Within the framework of this strategy, China actively employs instruments of “soft power,” relying on economic and diplomatic mechanisms to expand its international presence. This approach contributes to the legitimation of Beijing’s foreign policy course and strengthens its role within the emerging system of global governance.

In China’s strategy of becoming one of the global political and economic centers, the concept of “comprehensive national power” (综合国力 – *zonghe guoli*) assumes key importance. This concept serves as a fundamental theoretical foundation for the transformation of Beijing’s foreign policy paradigm. The notion of comprehensive national power reflects the integrative unity of economic potential, technological development, cultural influence, diplomatic resources, and military capabilities.

Such an approach enables China, in contrast to traditional models of geopolitical rivalry, to implement a multi-level strategy for strengthening its position on the international stage. In essence, this concept proceeds from the premise that, under contemporary conditions, a state’s power and its capacity to influence global processes are determined not only by the scale of its military potential but also by the level of its economic, social, cultural, and scientific-technological development, as well as by the balance of its foreign policy course².

Notably, as early as 1987, at an international conference devoted to the interrelationship between disarmament and development, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Xiang Sicheng emphasized that the safeguarding of national sovereignty and state security ultimately depends on the level of economic development, overall national strength, and active participation in maintaining regional and international peace, and cannot be reduced solely to the accumulation of armaments³.

The historical experience of the state is most succinctly reflected, above all, in the distinctive features of the worldview of China’s political elite. According to Denny Roy, the key characteristics of the Chinese foreign policy mindset are manifested in the following aspects:

¹ Wang Yi. China Will Continue to Advance a Fair and Orderly Multipolar World: speech at the Munich Security Conference, February 2025 / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. – Beijing, 2025. – URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

² Киреев А.А. Политика Китайской Народной Республики в рамках Шанхайской организации сотрудничества и группы БРИКС // Современный Китай в системе международных отношений. –М.: УРСС, 2012.

³ Внешняя политика КНР: Обеспечение суверенитета и целей развития // URL: <http://www.chinastar.ru/rus/1/5/2/>

- a Realpolitik-oriented mode of thinking, in which national interests occupy a primary position and the balance of power constitutes a central category of analysis and practice in international relations;
- a conviction in the legitimacy of China’s claims to a special role and significance within the global system, justified by the uniqueness of its millennia-old history and culture, as well as by the scale of its territory and population;
- the perception of a direct interrelationship between unfriendly external policies toward the country and internal instability, with the latter viewed as a factor that may be deliberately sustained by external actors in pursuit of their own strategic interests⁴.

From the perspective of Chinese scholars, the key task in shaping the contemporary system of international relations lies in the development of an adaptive model that, on the one hand, advances a paradigm of cooperation among major powers, and on the other acknowledges the inevitability of their strategic competition. Institutional mechanisms embodying this dual reality must simultaneously ensure the stability of the international system while preserving opportunities for states to safeguard their national interests. This paradigm serves as the theoretical foundation of China’s pragmatic foreign policy strategy⁵. At the present stage, China’s foreign policy activity is characterized by a стремлением to create favorable international conditions conducive to the country’s modernization, as well as by the search for its own place within the emerging world order as one of its key poles. Within this geopolitical context, Beijing has undertaken a reassessment of its strategic priorities. The Chinese leadership places particular emphasis on avoiding involvement in armed conflicts, attracting foreign investment and advanced technologies, and expanding trade and economic ties through the development of new export markets⁶.

Proceeding from prevailing geopolitical realities, China has begun to assign priority to its immediate regional environment in the implementation of its strategic plans. Beijing seeks to deepen economic and political integration with neighboring states through the establishment of regional institutional structures within its sphere of influence. Such an approach is aimed not only at strengthening regional cooperation but also at mitigating the potential adverse effects of the United States’ policy of geopolitical containment.

⁴ Roy D. China’s Foreign Relations. London: Macmillan Press, 1998. - P. 43.

⁵ Yan Xuetong. Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. – P. 42.

⁶ Дин Шичуань. Шилунь Цзян Цзэминь дуй Дэн Сяопин «шицзе гэцзюй гуань» дэцзичэн хэ фачжань (Точка зрения Цзян Цзэминя на вопрос развития интеграции мировой архитектуры - высказывания Дэн Сяопина) // Шицзе цзинци юй чжэнчи. 1999. № 11. - С. 11

China’s regional initiatives—including enhanced engagement with ASEAN, the development of strategic ties with the states of Central Asia, and integration processes within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative—constitute the practical expression of Beijing’s strategy to shape a stable geoeconomic environment in adjacent regions and to balance U.S. influence. This pragmatic course enables China to maintain flexibility in its foreign policy maneuvering and to ensure strategic autonomy on the international stage⁷.

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon its growing international authority and aggregate capabilities, China seeks to strengthen its leadership positions at both the global and regional levels. To this end, Beijing is developing specific formats of engagement with neighboring states aimed at expanding its influence. A significant instrument in this regard is the promotion of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, alongside the active involvement of partners in trade and economic cooperation with China.

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⁷ Боровой В. Региональная политика во внешнеполитической стратегии КНР после окончания «холодной войны» // Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений 2004. № 1. – С. 85.

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