

Is China a real world power?*

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David Shambaugh:

China Goes Global-Partial Power

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In his book “China Goes Global-Partial Power”, David Shambaugh, professor at George Washington University, addresses a topic and related matter that appears to warrant a straightforward “yes” in reply, namely whether China can be regarded as a global power (the author answers the question in the title).

The author dissects the global role and presence of China from multiple perspectives, from the economy to security policy and culture through diplomacy, and examines China’s image of itself and its own global role.

Over the past decades, China has gone from a peripheral nation to one of the leading global powers thanks to its carefully governed process, the Reform and Opening-up policy. It is China’s firm objective to not only be strong in one, but several dimensions of power, including technology, the economy and education, fostering its effort to become a total power. Shambaugh deems that China’s global presence is superficial, in that although it is ubiquitous, its presence is characterised by a passive and reactive attitude rather than the attitude of leader that would be necessary for it to attain its desired status.

Its own identity is also contentious for China, which is facing a sort of identity crisis. There is no homogenous identity, but rather several parallel or rival identities. The supporters of certain beliefs favour the maintenance of national autonomy and are suspicious towards the outside world, particularly Western countries and regard the above-mentioned Reform and Opening-up policy as a stain on China and its culture. Today, the predominant current aims to shore up China (its economy and military) and protect its interests, but some proponents of this approach stress the importance of diplomacy and culture, while others would emphasise focus on

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the great global powers and are calling for involvement only in matters relevant to China.

China has emerged from total isolation four decades ago to become a global diplomatic factor. However, diplomacy is an area where China remains only a partial power. For one, China, as a global power, is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a participant at all key diplomatic summits. However, China is mainly driven by its strict national interests (economic development, geographic integrity) and is less active in terms of global issues. Chinese diplomacy is characterised by behaviour fluctuating between extremes, being at times pragmatic, cooperative, proactive and globally oriented, while being at other times assertive or even aggressive.

As China continues to gain strength as a great power and see its global impact increase, Western democracies are increasingly demanding that it play its part in international matters. However the term “global governance” has only recently been added to the Chinese vocabulary. The Chinese regard this demand for greater international responsibility by Western countries with suspicion, and see it as a potential ensnarement or trap. China fears that after colonisation, this is just another way to restrict China’s opportunities by diverting resources from its domestic economic development. The majority of China’s citizens focus on local issues and fail to see the necessity and importance of taking part in the resolution of global issues. In addition, the Chinese consider the current international system unfair, and therefore China is unlikely to become a committed participant in international matters.

The economy is where China’s power and international presence is the most conspicuous. The Chinese economy is the second largest economy in the world after the US and is likely to become the largest one in the upcoming decade. But despite what is suggested by numerous statistics of this kind, China’s international position is not as strong as it appears. Although China is a great power in terms of commerce, bottom-shelf manufactured goods comprise the lion’s share of its exports, while the proportion of financial services and knowledge-intensive goods is very low. In addition, only a handful of Chinese firms have risen to the status of industry leaders on a global scale, and the international perception of the quality of Chinese goods is also poor. These factors attest to the fact that China is also a partial power in the economic domain.

After accumulating global power, China realised the importance of its own image and of cultural power, but there is no unified opinion on what elements it can use to achieve this. Some propose values rooted in ancient Chinese culture, also regarded as universal values: peace and harmony, morality, etiquette and good faith. Others support the capacity and legitimacy of the Chinese political system as the

foundations of cultural power. The third approach proposes basing China's cultural power on its development and economic convergence. In a nutshell, China's cultural power and cultural attractiveness is currently very low and is not set to change in the near future until China realises that it must concentrate on earning cultural power using the opportunities available rather than buying it.

It may first come as a surprise that China, which has the world's largest army, is not a global military power, but much rather a regional power. Despite having the largest army (with a strength of 2.3 million), its level of technical equipment falls short of the US army. In addition, China is not a member of alliance systems and has no foreign military bases, which means that its army can only implement military operations in areas located close to China. The Chinese military is expected to catch up with the US by the 2020s, but its involvement in global security policy is likely to remain shaped by national interests (economic interests and irredentist efforts), in spite of international demands.