

The Strategic Narrative of Anti-Hegemonism

Doris Vogl

In China, the concept of anti-hegemonism is a largely discussed subject in the academic disciplines of international relations and security analysis. At the same time, the issue of anti-hegemonism is by no means restricted to the academic world but represents a main supporting pillar in foreign and security policy. This is well-illustrated by the latest version of China's National Defence Policy, accessible on the website of the PRC Ministry of Defence:

Never Seeking Hegemony, Expansion or Spheres of Influence. This is the distinctive feature of China's national defence in the new era. [...] History proves and will continue to prove that China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony. No matter how it might develop, China will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence.¹

Apart from official documents, the narrative of anti-hegemonism regularly flows into the statements of Chinese state leadership representatives. Wei Fenghe, Minister of National Defence, referred to this narrative at the Asia Security Summit (Shangri-la Dialogue) in 2019, nearly utilizing the same wording as in the Defence Policy:

In the future, no matter how strong it becomes, China shall never threaten anyone, seek hegemony or establish spheres of influence. History has proven and will continue to prove that China will not follow the beaten path of big powers seeking hegemony when it grows strong. Hegemony does not conform to China's values and national interests.²

As a side note, the exact rendering of formulas or wordings has always been characteristic of Chinese official narratives. The strategic message of a narrative is "carved in stone" on purpose and offers no room for rhetorical modification by the speaker.

¹ <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defense-policy/index.htm>.

² International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "The 18th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Fourth Plenary Session," June 2, 2019, transcript.

Historical background

Anti-hegemonism ranks as one of the long-term strategic narratives, dating back to the early period of the People's Republic under the leadership of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. The anti-hegemonic narrative is closely linked to the "Five Principles of peaceful Coexistence"³, which are part of the principle of non-interference.

Amidst an ongoing Cold War situation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the young PR China regarded both systems as a hegemonic threat for world peace and, more importantly, for national security. Contrary to the relatively young People's Republic, both the USA and USSR were in possession of nuclear weapons and permanent seats in the UN Security Council. The vulnerability of the People's Republic was also reflected by the fact that, until November 1971, the entire PRC was represented by Taiwan within the United Nations.

After the end of the Sino-Soviet friendship in 1960 - which resulted in a geopolitical split until the late Gorbachev era - tensions over disputed border lines broke out at several locations and escalated in the battle of Zhenbao along the Ussuri river in 1968. Hence, the USSR was perceived as the primary hegemonic threat by Beijing for nearly three decades.

By the end of the 20th century, only one of the two hegemonic powers had survived, and China had to redefine its' threat scenarios. According to Chinese perception, the collapse of the Soviet Union evolved into an era of "unipolar hegemonism" of the United States, when the Washington Consensus⁴ was established on a global scale. According to the Chinese point

³ "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" constitute the fundamental doctrine of the People's Republic foreign policy. They were proposed by Zhou Enlai in 1953 to India and Myanmar and further extended in the Ten Principles of Bandung, adopted at the 1955 Asian-African Conference. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.

⁴ The Washington Consensus refers to a set of mostly free-market economic ideas, supported by prominent economists and international organizations, such as IMF, World Bank, EU and US. The ten principles of the Washington Consensus, developed by the economist John Williamson in 1989, include ten sets of specific policy recommendations.

of view, the era of US unipolarism already showed major signs of decline during the global financial crisis of 2008:

Later, the unipolar era proved to be a fleeting moment and the intense optimism prevalent mainly in the West turned out to be premature when the 2008-2009 financial crisis broke out and discredited the Washington Consensus.⁵

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, the legitimate question arises whether China itself has stepped into the trap of hegemonic behaviour patterns and whether that concerns the Euro-strategic area as well. This thematic field will be examined in Part III of this volume, following the regional and country analysis of Part II.

Present-day relevance of the anti-hegemonic narrative

In the current daily diplomatic conduct of the People's Republic the anti-hegemonic narrative is still omnipresent in the public statements of government representatives. On the side-lines of the National People's Congress of March 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi even draws a direct line between the question of systemic rivalry and the perceived hegemonic aspirations of Western great powers:

Choice of system should be made in a tailor-made way, rather than through trimming the feet to fit in the shoes. Whether a path works for a country depends on how it fits the country's conditions. To smear or attack others for their different system or even claim superiority is in essence "hegemony of system."⁶

Apart from the diplomatic level, the reproach of Western hegemonic ambitions is also to be found in the current Chinese academic discourse on economic issues. This is especially emphasized with regard to development theory and development policy. Tang Xiaoyang from the Department of International Relations at Tsinghua University considers the imposition of

⁵ Jiemian Yang (2020), "Major Power Relations in a Post-Pandemic World Order," in *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* (2020/1), 5.

⁶ MFA, Press conference of March 7, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1859138.shtml.

socio-political reform on developing countries as the wrong path and underlines China's anti-hegemonic attitude. The aspect of democratization is not mentioned in Tang's critique:

The Washington Consensus assigned developing countries with restructuring of their socio-political systems. However, the diverse and complex socio-political conditions particular to each country, renders implementation of all the given prescriptions nearly impossible. China was able to develop by promoting market economy and international trade while maintaining a socio-political system different from the West. China's own development and its active commercial engagements with other developing countries prove that market-oriented activities can flourish without following the Washington model.⁷

Besides declaring existing Western development models – like the Washington Consensus – as non-functional and obsolete, Beijing's anti-hegemonic narrative also fulfils an essential future-oriented function. In several aspects, it perfectly consolidates the argumentative basis for the widely propagated global visions of a “new global order” and a “community with a shared future for mankind”. At this point, the narrative of moral reasoning turns back to the argumentation that the developing world is suffering from the injustices and inadequacies of the old world order. Despite clear signs of erosion and decline, the old Western world order is still in place and hinders the development potential of the global South, according to China's interpretation:

The grand debate around the new world order should be solution oriented with the ultimate goal of building a better future. This is particularly relevant for the vast developing world as they are presented a historic opportunity to correct the injustices cumulatively imposed on them by the old world orders and to earn their long-due rights and interests in the future.⁸

The underlying message is clear: A new world order is supposed to prioritize the interests of the developing countries, whereas the industrialized world and mid-level power players, will have to pay their long-outstanding share to the global south.

⁷ Tang Xiaoyang (2020), “Co-evolutionary Pragmatism: Re-examine ‘China Model’ and Its Impact on Developing Countries,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29: 126, 858.

⁸ Jiemin Yang (2020), “The Theory and Policies of Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Strategy,” 14.

The US researcher Deborah Larson strongly emphasizes the fact that China does not offer a particular “development model” to the world but rather aims at preparing the field for development in global and regional organizations. According to Larson, this kind of wide approach towards the issue of global development creates a significant strategic advantage for China. In stark contrast to the logic of this analysis, the official Chinese narrative will always remain focused on the ideological aspect. Following the ideological framework of the People’s Republic, the anti-hegemonic orientation simply does not allow the development of a “model”.