



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS REVIEW

## 2011

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A Brief Analysis of China's Crisis Diplomacy Decision-making in the Post-Cold War Era  
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# Intersubjective Cognitive Dissonance and Foreign Policy Making in China

Qin Yaqing

## I

Cognitive dissonance is an unavoidable factor for the study of decision making. There are mainly two kinds of cognitive dissonance. One is subject-object cognitive dissonance between the subject and the object. All policy-making should be based on facts. Unfortunately, the facts are not always completely objective facts, but rather those in the decision makers' cognitive view. The closer the decision makers' cognition to the objective facts, the more accurate their policy is, the easier their intention can be realized. When studying foreign policy-making, we should study the decision maker's cognitive view, where there are always misperceptions. The other is the intersubjective cognitive dissonance, which means that for the same object different actors may have different cognitive views. The actor's cognitive world is formed under very complicated environment, where there are different but always interactive actors. They always make their own judgments about other actors on the basis of their own historical background and experience, and then make policies according to these judgments. Numerous complicated factors, micro and macro, economic and social, internal and external, form a complicated decision making environment. The more complicated the environment is, the more interactive factors and relations within it, the greater the cognitive dissonance among different actors is. As for subject-object cognitive dissonance, there have already been works devoted to it.<sup>1</sup> However, there is still no influential and important research work on intersubjective cognitive dissonance and its influence on policy making.

The intersubjective cognitive dissonance in foreign policy making is quite obvious. As the actor's cognition is based on its own knowledge structure, cultural background, experiences and information, intersubjective cognitive dissonance always exists. This is especially prominent in the anarchic

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Qin Yaqing, Professor of International Relations, China Foreign Affairs University.

1. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*, translated by Qin Yaqing, Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2003.

international system. A wise decision maker is usually quite sensitive to this kind of cognitive dissonance, and always tries to minimize it so as to improve the decision-making environment. In this way, their intention can be realized to the greatest extent. Therefore, when studying foreign policy-making, we have to deal with the different cognition of different actors in this decision-making environment. When the environment becomes complicated, cognitive dissonance among different actors might become greater, which makes policy-making more difficult. The research on intersubjective cognitive dissonance becomes more imperative in such cases. The world is undergoing rapid changes all the time, and the cognitive dissonance of different actors for the same object varies. If the cognitive dissonance is quite obvious, it not only makes decision-making difficult, but may also lead to serious decision-making mistakes. Neville Chamberlain had thought that his diplomatic efforts could bring peace to a whole generation; however, his visit to Munich did not prevent Hitler's invasion. According to intersubjective cognitive dissonance theory, this mistake was due to Chamberlain's incorrect cognition of objective facts at that time. But this kind of analysis undoubtedly neglected the great cognitive dissonance between Hitler and Chamberlain. It might be intersubjective cognitive dissonance that caused the failure of Chamberlain's appeasement policy.

Since the 1980s, the relations between China and the outside world have undergone historic transformation. The international system has witnessed tremendous changes after the end of the Cold War. China and the world have become increasingly interdependent. The most important point is that China's domestic political, economic and social processes are in frequent interaction with the international society. Almost all the international actors interact with China. Any important international event will influence China's domestic process, and any important domestic event in China will influence the international process. With China's rapid development, this kind of mutual influence will become even stronger. This means that China's foreign policy-making has to face the interactive domestic and international environment, and is conducted within the model of two-level game.<sup>2</sup> In reality, China's foreign policy decision-making environment is becoming more and more complicated, the domestic-international interaction makes it imperative for China to pay attention to the cognitive dissonance among difference actors, which also makes it an important topic for scholars to study.

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2. Robert Putman, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization*, Vol.42, No.3, 1988, pp.427—462.

## II

At present, there are three kinds of intersubjective cognitive dissonance regarding foreign policy making in China.

The first is the cognitive dissonance between China and other countries, which means that China itself and the international community view China differently. Most prominently is that the identification of China by ourselves and the international community is different. The identification of China is indeed very complicated, because China does have more than one identity: both big and small, both strong and weak, both rich and poor. After 30 years of reform and opening up, China's economic strength has been improved greatly, and China's GDP is now ranked the second in the world. Meanwhile, China is a country with a huge population, its development is quite uneven, and the economic development in different regions varies significantly. China's GDP per capita is still quite low. In fact, to identify China with any single identity is far from being sufficient.

However, in real decision-making process, people often want to use one identity to identify China so as to reduce policy decision-making pressure, or to simplify the decision-making process. In their approach to China's identity, the cognitive dissonance among different actors very naturally comes out. In understanding China's national condition and the international power structure, we identified that China's identity includes two basic elements: China is a developing country, and is still in the preliminary socialist period. In some sense, this is undoubtedly true. China is a large country with a huge population, and both the social differences and regional differences in China are huge. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, China will continue to focus on domestic development. However, according to some international opinion, China is often described as a quasi-superpower, or the second power in the world. After the financial crisis of 2008, such voices became even stronger. Terms such as G2 or "Chimerica" have been coined one after another to describe China's elevated status. Without the participation of Chinese delegates, international conferences could hardly be fully "international". What is more, for some major countries, China has always been an important factor in formulating their global strategy and foreign policy. Therefore, as for China's international identity and status, there is prominent intersubjective cognitive dissonance between China and the international community, which has become a problem for China's foreign policy decision-making.

The second dissonance is the vertical intersubjective cognitive dissonance, which refers to the cognitive dissonance between Chinese political elites and



the general public. China's foreign policy decision makers and the grassroots understand and view China's international strategy and foreign policy differently. Because of the special features of foreign policy making, the information that the public receives is different from that received by political elites. Political elites, especially those participating in decision-making, have much more information than the public, and sometimes even monopolize the information. The information that the public gets usually comes from domestic media and interpersonal exchange. For instance, during the Cuban missile crisis, the power of the Soviet Union in the eyes of the public of the East European countries and Soviet Union was much greater than its actual strength, while their judgment about the power of the United States was lower than its real status. Therefore, although the decision-makers of the Soviet Union, including Khrushchev, knew the situation and withdrew the missiles from Cuba accordingly, the compromise puzzled many people. The allies of the Soviet Union especially, felt extremely disappointed and demoralized.

One of the major vertical cognitive dissonance in China is the so called "soft" and "hard" aspects of China's foreign policy. China's reform and opening up policy has outlined that China's main strategy is to develop its national economy, and the main task of China's foreign strategy is to create and maintain a favorable international environment for China's economic development. Therefore, international cooperation becomes the main objective for China's foreign strategy. "Peace, development, and cooperation" is the guiding principle for China's foreign policy making. The general situation where countries are interdependent is conducive to China's development. "Development" has been defined as a core interest of China. The past 30 years show that this is a very wise external strategy. It realized the basic intention of China's foreign strategy, maintained and created a favorable international environment for China, which makes it impossible for countries like the U.S. to contain China as they did to the Soviet Union. Without this strategy, China's economic development would have come across more difficulties and China's GDP would not rank second in the world.

However, the public wants to see hard-line foreign policy. Within the past over 100 years, China's public has been seeking prosperity and national rejuvenation of China in the world. This is a kind of indelible political psychology and the main motivation for China's rejuvenation.<sup>3</sup> With the improvement of China's national power, this kind of psychology will become even stronger. Meanwhile, nationalism may also ascend, which is always a

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3. Qin Yaqing, "Struggle for Identity: A Political Psychology of China's Rise," in Brantly Womack, ed., *China's Rise in Historical Perspective*, Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2010, pp. 249–269.

double edged sword. On the one hand, it stimulates a nation's spirit of self-strengthening, which can help the nation stand rock-firm in the family of nations, and motivate the people to endeavor for this national goal. This is particularly true for China, which has undergone invasion and humiliation from the world powers throughout modern and contemporary times. On the other hand, extreme nationalism may stimulate irrational emotion, prompting the nation to set apart itself from the outside world, and making it isolated in the international community. The public hopes to see harder foreign policy, which is the mixture of these two kinds of nationalism. The era of the internet in some sense has made the world flat and the centralization of power has declined. The sources of information have become pluralized and the spread of information has become much faster. The information itself has become more complicated. Information constructed in the dissemination process becomes the "real" information.<sup>4</sup> Although public appeal is not always rational, it is one of the factors of a country's decision-making environment, which directly influences the country's foreign policy and the maneuverability of its international behavior.

The third dissonance is the horizontal cognitive dissonance, which is the cognitive dissonance for the same object among different interest groups. The interest relations of domestic and international political processes are very complicated. Having entered into international society, the interest of Chinese society has quickly become pluralized, and the pluralization of interest promoted the formation of different interest groups, which also produced cognitive dissonance among them. No political system can neglect interest group politics, which is an important component of foreign policy decision-making through the interaction between domestic and international factors. Graham Alison, based on the research on the Cuban missile crisis, put forward the irrational decision-making model of the governmental policies, which shows that different departments of the government all try to define the interest of their own as the national interest. This also leads to competition among them. Although Alison has considered the interest divergence among different departments, he takes a state-centric approach in his research. The emphasis is put on the competition among different departments of the government and has not considered the influence and function of the social groups.<sup>5</sup>

However, social force is an important factor for the foreign policy decision-making environment. The development of pluralized interests in the Chinese

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4. See Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat*, translated by He Fan, etc., Chang Sha: Hu Nan Science and Technology Press, 2006.

5. Graham Alison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Longman, 1999.

society is a normal social phenomenon, which will certainly become a part of the foreign policy decision-making process. This also widens the cognitive dissonance among different interest groups. Meanwhile, with the development of Chinese society and the extension of Chinese interests overseas, all these interests want themselves reflected through foreign policy, which makes decision-making procedures even more complicated. For example, the interest of the export-oriented enterprises might be different from that of enterprises focused on domestic market. The interests of the coastal areas might be different from those of the inland areas. The interests of the environmental protection department might be different from those of the energy department, etc. Under the situation of social pluralization and power diffusion, to define the interest of a country in an intensified way will be very difficult. Even when the state defines interest rationally at the national level, it will undergo changes during the realization process with the involvement of interest groups.

### III

Domestic and international, horizontal and vertical intersubjective cognitive dissonance exists in any political system and any society. Therefore, it is a common phenomenon for decision-making. However, the extent of intersubjective cognitive dissonance might be different and could be adjusted with some measures. As for the foreign policy decision-making environment, the greater the intersubjective cognitive dissonance is, the more difficult and complicated policy-making will be, and the smaller the implementation operation space will be. In the 1950s, 1960s, and even 1970s, this kind of intersubjective cognitive dissonance existed; however, it operated at a relatively low degree and did not produce prominent and decisive influence on the foreign policy making environment. With China's reform and opening up, both China's domestic and international environment have changed greatly. The international system experienced transformation since the end of the Cold War. China itself is also undergoing great social transformation with reform and opening up. The interaction and mutual influence between China and the international community is increasingly stronger. This kind of fast development and intensive interaction also makes the intersubjective cognitive dissonance increasingly prominent. For a transforming and fast-developing society, this is quite common. What we need to consider is how to narrow these differences, so as to make foreign policy making more scientific, diplomatic ways more reasonable, and thus more easily differences them in diplomatic practices.

Intersubjective cognitive dissonance is very likely to lead to an expectation gap. The difference between China and the rest of world makes some people

think that China is unwilling to bear international responsibility. China is still a developing country; however, it is considered the second power in the world according to some foreign opinions. An obvious result of this kind of cognitive dissonance is that the international society wants China to bear greater international responsibility, some even go beyond China's actual ability. The emission reduction objective for China put forward at the Copenhagen Summit is such an example. There are also many examples in other areas. With China's further development, there will come more such examples. For instance, transnational problems in areas such as environmental protection, nuclear disarmament, foreign aid, and regional security, expectations toward China tend to become higher. The vertical cognitive dissonance tends to make the Chinese public think that China's foreign policies are too mild, and they do not understand them. The horizontal cognitive dissonance tends to make people think of group interest and national interest as the same. In this case, national interest is compared from the view of self interest. Sometimes, even when people know what national interest is, they still put their group interest above it.

Whether the foreign policy making environment is good or not depends on the condition of intersubjective cognitive dissonance to a large extent. To minimize intersubjective cognitive dissonance will make the environment more convenient and less difficult, and vice versa. One of the difficulties that China's foreign policy-making is faced with at present is, on the one hand, China is developing quickly and its foreign relations have extended in an unprecedented manner. Both the domestic and international environment that China's diplomacy is faced with is becoming increasingly complicated. On the other hand, the three kinds of dissonances mentioned above tend to increase the complexity of the environment and sometimes even dramatically. This makes it harder for China's foreign policy making and policy implementation.

Undoubtedly, there are many measures to help ease such problems, such as a reasonable public diplomacy strategy, an efficient high-level diplomatic coordinating mechanism, and so on. As intersubjective cognitive dissonance has become a problem that foreign policy making has to deal with, this paper first aims to put forward this concept so as to design a secondary agenda for foreign policy making study. In this way we can focus on intersubjective cognitive dissonance and consider how is it produced, and under what condition and with what measures intersubjective cognitive dissonance would be greater or slighter. For China, which is undergoing one of the greatest transformations in history and is facing a fast changing and complicated domestic and international situation, this is definitely a very important subject.

# An Explanatory Practice Model of China's Participation in International System

Zhu Liqun

**Abstract** China's participation in the international system is a continuous process of "practice of engagement". This process is not only influenced by international and domestic circumstances, but also in the complex interactions involved in learning and innovation, the practice subject has formed a new knowledge of the international system and its relations with the system. The international system's responses to China's practice of engagement promote the formation of China's new identity. At the same time, in the practice of engagement, through reflection and innovation, China influences the international system continuously, promoting a move in the international system towards a more just, reasonable and orderly development. Thus, a causal mechanism can be established among "practice of engagement", "status recognition" and "change of order" to explain China's active participation in the international system. This paper will place "practice" in the ontological perspective again. Practice generates discourse and cognition, creating the essential nature of identity and norms. It is the practice of engagement that shapes the relationship between China and the international system.

**Key words** China; International System; Practice of Engagement; China's Diplomacy

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Currently, the international system is facing a new round of adjustment, and China is encountering a major opportunity to get more deeply involved in the international system. How to make the adjustment of the international system toward the direction conducive to China's development is the core of Beijing's strategic tasks. With the international community's increasing concerns about China's rapid development, how to deepen the relationship between China and the international system and counteract the "China threat theory" is an urgent task for China's diplomacy. At the same time, China itself is in a critical stage in deepening domestic reform. The internal balance of pressure is mounting and the co-relation between various problems in China and world politics and economy has increased substantially. How to participate in the international system in the process of overall co-ordination of domestic and foreign affairs and thus adhere to peaceful development is China's major

challenge in the near future. Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to promote the research into China's participation in the international system, propose theoretical frameworks of more explanatory power, and accordingly conduct in-depth and detailed empirical research.

China's participation in the international system is designed to participate in global interaction and collective decision-making, gain access to and safeguard China's national interests in global governance and promote the progress and development of the international community. Since the reform and opening-up, China has accelerated the pace of its engagement in the international system: gradually entering the system from the edge and moving to the center to assume the position of an important and responsible member.

The relationship between China and the international system has undergone tremendous and profound changes. In this process, the rise of China does not, like the traditional great powers, employ the use of force to challenge the existing order, but rather uses existing channels to upgrade its status. At the same time, China has always been opposed to hegemony and adhered to the independent and peaceful foreign policy line. In this sense, China's diplomatic practice in its participation in the international system not only challenges the existing Western theories of international relations, but also provides a unique case worth further study on the empirical level.

Based on the existing research, this paper proposes "practice of engagement" as the core concept of the theoretical framework to explore the fundamental motivation for the historical changes in the relationship between China and the international system. This paper argues that China's participation in the international system is a continuous process of practice of engagement, which promotes the profound changes in the relations between China and the international system. China's practice of engagement in the international system not only creates a new knowledge of the relationship between China and the international system, but also constructs China's new identity in the international system. In the interactions between China and the international system, this new identity has been recognized at the levels of form, distribution and value in different degrees. At the same time China's practice of engagement has influenced the direction of transition of the international order in its own way. Thus, a causal mechanism can be established among "practice of engagement", "status recognition" and "change of order" to explain China's active participation in the international system.

Through constructing and interpreting the model of China's practice of engagement, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the research into China's participation in the international system should start from the rich practice of its own, rather than the presuppositions held by the schools of Western

International Relations theory. Only in this way can we innovate diplomatic theories to better propose targeted strategic measures and promote our research to better reflect Chinese characteristics.

## **I. The Core Issue: the Root of Changes in the Relationship between China and the International System**

Admittedly, after 30 years of China's reform and opening-up and extensive involvement in international affairs, the relationship between China and the international system has undergone historic changes. So, what promotes this historic change? How to judge the trend of this change? For this issue, considerable attention has been paid by domestic and foreign scholars in many publications. In general, different theoretical schools offer different explanations.

As for realism, the most representative work is John Mearsheimer's point of view. He believes that the pursuit of hegemony is China's motivation for participation in the international system, and the competition with the U.S. hegemony is the essential characteristic of the relationship between China and the international system.<sup>1</sup> According to Mearsheimer, a rising China will never maintain the *status quo*; any country which has risen is sure to challenge the international system rather than maintain the *status quo*. The power-transition theory also contends that the danger of a major war is quite high when a rising, dissatisfied challenger threatens to overtake a declining, satisfied hegemon.<sup>2</sup> And the theory believes that China is undoubtedly a power of global leadership and an emerging challenger dissatisfied with the existing order, and the economic benefits, security, and status it is accorded within it.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, Barry Buzan's viewpoint is the most representative of the English School. He believes that the integration of emerging countries into the international system is the result of expansion of international society. The international society started first from Europe and expanded to other regions and then globally. In order to become a member of the system, any non-European countries must adapt themselves to, and accept the norms of the

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1. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, translated by Wang Yiwei and Tang Xiaosong, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008, p.400; John Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise, *Current History*," Vol.105, No.690, April 2006, pp.160—162.

2. A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *War Ledger*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp.22—27.

3. David Rapkin and William R. Thompson, "Power Transition, Challenge and the(Re) emergence of China," *International Interactions*, Vol.29, No.4, 2003, p.316.



core system.<sup>4</sup> China's participation in the international system is driven by the expansion of the international community. The relationship between China and the international system depends on whether China accepts all the existing system of norms. In Buzan's view, China only accepts the international economic norms, and refuses to accept the core system of rules, such as Western-style democracy, freedom, and human rights. Therefore, for the international community, China's future development is still quite uncertain.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the mainstream constructivists focus on normative structure and the spread of norms in discussing the relationship between the emerging countries and the international system. Constructivism, as well as the English School, attaches importance to the impact of normative structure, focuses on the ways of spreading the norms, the subject-object relationship and the socialization of the norms.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, to comply with and internalize international norms is the substantive requirement for emerging countries to participate in the international system. Chinese studies from this perspective are dominated by examining China's compliance with international rules and norms. One view is that in a uni-polar era with no mandatory external pressure and returns, China takes the initiative to participate in the international system, which reflects that China has taken a more cooperative and self-restraining policy.<sup>7</sup> So China is more like a *status quo* power in the international system.<sup>8</sup> Another view is that China's compliance is selective, completely driven by utilitarianism and China is a "quasi-revolutionary state."<sup>9</sup>

The above mainstream realism, English School and constructivist viewpoints are concentrated on the system level to find the reasons for China's participation in the international system, and focus on determining whether China is a

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4. Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.222—227; Barry Buzan, "Culture and International Society," *International Relations*, Vol.86, No.1, 2010, pp.1—25.

5. Barry Buzan, "Culture and International Society".

6. As for the research on constructivist international norms diffusion, please refer to Huang Chao, "The International Norms Diffusion under the Constructivist Perspective," *Foreign Affairs Review*, 2008, No.4, pp.55—62.

7. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social State: China in International Institutions, 1980—2000*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p.196.

8. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power," *International Security*, Vol.27, No.4, 2003, pp.5—56; Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980—2000*, p.197.

9. Ann Kent's research fully affirmed China's compliance behavior in the international system, but she claims that there is a big gap in China's level of compliance in social behavior, especially in the field of human rights. She thus concluded that China's participation in the international system is selective, completely driven by the utilitarianism stemming from its own self-interest and defined China as a "quasi-revolutionary state," see Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations, and Global Security*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, pp.242—243.



challenge or *status quo* power.

The fourth explanation is the domestic political perspective. Scholars who explain the relationship between China and the international system at the unit level no longer see China as a single, rational actor, but analyze the various actors and domestic factors which influence decision-making. They emphasize that China's participation in the international system is not a simple mirror reaction to international structure pressure, but the product of domestic political process. The most representative scholar is Zhang Baijia who proposes that China influences the world by changing itself. He believes that the changes in China's foreign relations "have always been closely connected with China's domestic political development, and one can even say that China relies mainly on its own internal transformation, rather than some kind of external behavior to change the relationship between China and other countries, and even the whole world".<sup>10</sup> However, this did not clarify whether there is a reciprocal causal relationship between the changes in the international community and those in China.

The above typical views explain China's participation in the international system and their mutual relations from different perspectives, but there are a number of defects and deficiencies. First, the three Western theories fail to explain China's process of participation in the international system. China's participation is a dynamic process of rapid integration. The existing mainstream theories, whether structural realism starting from the physical structure, or social constructivism starting from the structure of concepts in order to explain the conduct of a nation, encounter difficulties when trying to explain the process of China's participation in the international system. Realism, which starts from the hard power structure, puts the focus more on China's military modernization. Any progress China made in military would inevitably lead to the emergence of a "China threat". However, in fact, China has maintained peaceful integration into the international system for more than 30 years. To explain the relationship between China and the international system in light of the structure of concepts, the structural differences between China and the West can be readily seen, rather than the trend of overall cooperation and development between China and Western countries. Therefore, it is very difficult for the static Western structural theories to clearly explain the relationship between China and the international system. They failed to see that with the increasing plurality of the social world, "the structure does not exist and develop in a single way, but presents itself as relational existence

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10. Zhang Baijia, "Change Ourselves, Influence the World—A Discussion on China's Diplomacy Clues in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *China Social Science*, 2002, No.1.