

How China sees the world

And how the world should see China.

Illustration by Jon Berkeley (with apologies to Steinberg and *The New Yorker*)



It is an ill wind that blows no one any good. For many in China even the buffeting by the gale that has hit the global economy has a bracing message. The rise of China over the past three decades has been astonishing. But it has lacked the one feature it needed fully to satisfy the ultranationalist fringe: an accompanying decline of the West. Now capitalism is in a funk in its heartlands. Europe and Japan, embroiled in the deepest post-war recession, are barely worth consideration as rivals. America, the superpower, has passed its peak. Although in public China's leaders eschew triumphalism, there is a sense in Beijing that the reassertion of the Middle Kingdom's global ascendancy is at hand (see article).

China's prime minister, Wen Jiabao, no longer sticks to the script that China is a humble player in world affairs that wants to focus on its own economic development. He talks of China as a "great power" and worries about America's profligate spending endangering his \$1 trillion nest egg there. Incautious remarks by the new American treasury secretary about China manipulating its currency were dismissed as ridiculous; a duly penitent Hillary Clinton was welcomed in Beijing, but as an equal. This month saw an apparent attempt to engineer a low-level naval confrontation with an American spy ship in the South China Sea. Yet at least the Americans get noticed. Europe, that speck on the horizon, is ignored: an EU summit was cancelled and France is still blacklisted because Nicolas Sarkozy dared to meet the Dalai Lama.

Already a big idea has spread far beyond China: that geopolitics is now a bipolar affair, with America and China the only two that matter. Thus in London next month the real business will not be the G20 meeting but the "G2" summit between Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao. This not only worries the Europeans, who, having got rid of George Bush's unipolar politics, have no wish to see it replaced by a Pacific duopoly, and the Japanese, who have long been paranoid about their rivals in Asia. It also seems to be having an effect in Washington, where Congress's fascination with America's nearest rival risks acquiring a protectionist edge.

Reds under the bed

Before panic spreads, it is worth noting that China's new assertiveness reflects weakness as well as strength. This remains a poor country facing, in Mr Wen's words, its most difficult year of the new century. The latest wild guess at how many jobs have already been lost—20m—hints at the scale of the problem. The World Bank has cut its forecast for China's growth this

year to 6.5%. That is robust compared with almost anywhere else, but to many Chinese, used to double-digit rates, it will feel like a recession. Already there are tens of thousands of protests each year: from those robbed of their land for development; from laid-off workers; from those suffering the side-effects of environmental despoliation. Even if China magically achieves its official 8% target, the grievances will worsen.

Far from oozing self-confidence, China is witnessing a fierce debate both about its economic system and the sort of great power it wants to be—and it is a debate the government does not like. This year the regime curtailed even the perfunctory annual meeting of its parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), preferring to confine discussion to back-rooms and obscure internet forums. Liberals calling for greater openness are being dealt with in the time-honoured repressive fashion. But China's leaders also face rumblings of discontent from leftist nationalists, who see the downturn as a chance to halt market-oriented reforms at home, and for China to assert itself more stridently abroad. An angry China can veer into xenophobia, but not all the nationalist left's causes are so dangerous: one is for the better public services and social-safety net the country sorely needs.

So China is in a more precarious situation than many Westerners think. The world is not bipolar and may never become so. The EU, for all its faults, is the world's biggest economy. India's population will overtake China's. But that does not obscure the fact that China's relative power is plainly growing—and both the West and China itself need to adjust to this.

For Mr Obama, this means pulling off a difficult balancing act. In the longer term, if he has not managed to seduce China (and for that matter India and Brazil) more firmly into the liberal multilateral system by the time he leaves office, then historians may judge him a failure. In the short term he needs to hold China to its promises and to scold it for its lapses: Mrs Clinton should have taken it to task over Tibet and human rights when she was there. The Bush administration made much of the idea of welcoming China as a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. The G20 is a chance to give China a bigger stake in global decision-making than was available in the small clubs of the G7 and G8. But it is also a chance for China to show it can exercise its new influence responsibly.

The bill for the great Chinese takeaway

China's record as a citizen of the world is strikingly threadbare. On a host of issues from Iran to Sudan, it has used its main geopolitical asset, its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, to obstruct progress, hiding behind the excuse that it does not want to intervene in other countries' affairs. That, sadly, will take time to change. But on the more immediate issue at hand, the world economy, there is room for action.

Over the past quarter-century no country has gained more from globalisation than China. Hundreds of millions of its people have been dragged out of subsistence into the middle class. China has been a grumpy taker in this process. It helped derail the latest round of world trade talks. The G20 meeting offers it a chance to show a change of heart. In particular, it is being asked to bolster the IMF's resources so that the fund can rescue crisis-hit countries in places like eastern Europe. Some in Beijing would prefer to ignore the IMF, since it might help ex-communist countries that have developed "an anti-China mentality". Rising above such cavilling and paying up would be a small step in itself. But it would be a sign that the Middle Kingdom has understood what it is to be a great power.

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