In December 1978, the Chinese Communist Party convened its Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee. The meeting decided that the focus of the country be shifted to economic construction and that reform and opening up to the outside world would be a basic policy of the country. Reform and opening up brought about fundamental changes to the theory, concept and practice of China’s foreign policy. China began to integrate itself into the international system. Its relations with the UN also entered a new era.

It has been 30 years since the Reform first began. This article presents an overview of the development of China’s relations with the UN during this period by highlighting some of the major changes in China’s attitude toward the activities of the UN in various fields.

Born in November 1957, Mr. Pang graduated from Fudan University, Shanghai and Beijing Languages University. He held various positions in the Foreign Ministry of China, including Deputy Director and Director of Department of International Organizations and Conferences, Counselor at Permanent Mission of China to the UN Office at Geneva, Deputy Director-General of Department of Arms Control and Disarmament. He joined the United Nations in 2000 and served as Senior Activity Evaluation Officer of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). He is currently Vice President and Director-General of United Nations Association of China.


I. Background

The evolution of China’s relations with the UN is the result of a variety of factors. It reflected the gradual maturing of China’s multilateral diplomatic policy. At the same time, it is also the product of changes in the international environment, as well as change of China’s judgment on the world situation.

1. Changes of International Environment

In the early 1970s, China’s basic analysis of the world situation was that contention between the United States and the Soviet Union for world hegemony was the source of a spiraling arms race and incessant regional conflicts. A new world war was inevitable and risk of war was looming near.

At the early stage of its reform, China still maintained that view. In February 1978, the Chinese Premier, Hua Guofeng, said at the National People’s Congress, “Internationally, the US and Soviet Union, the two superpowers, are in a fierce rivalry for world hegemony. War will erupt sooner or later.”1 Mr. Hua’s view did not change in 1979, stating that “the dangers of war are growing.”2

In the 1980s, radical changes occurred in the international situation, when relations between the two superpowers started to thaw. Based upon his own observation and analysis, Deng Xiaoping changed that gloomy conclusion. He pointed out that maintenance of world peace stood a good chance and it was possible that large-scale world war might not erupt within a relatively long period. He said in one of his speeches that “world war can be put off and peace maintained for a longer time if the struggle against hegemony is carried out effectively. This is possible, and precisely what we are working for. Like the people

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