US Diplomacy and Diplomats: A Chinese View

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Summary

This article presents mainstream views in China about US diplomacy in general and particularly US diplomacy towards China in the twenty-first century. In general, US diplomacy is seen as primacy-seeking, missionary pragmatism, hard power first, with persistent impulsive unilateralism, and only constrained by a disruptive power-sharing domestic political system. Chinese leaders and diplomats tend to favour those American counterparts who can demonstrate pragmatism, appreciation, commitment and professionalism. They believe that China needs to negotiate from a position of strength with normally over-demanding American counterparts, and to pay extraordinary attention to detail in negotiations. While the Chinese held a negative view about the overall diplomacy of US President George W. Bush, they welcomed his pragmatic diplomacy towards China and regarded it as his most positive diplomatic legacy. Although the Chinese have developed a more positive view towards President Obama’s diplomacy, in considering the United States’ persisting desire for primacy, its missionary tradition and highly pluralistic domestic politics, the Chinese are more cautious in embracing the Obama administration’s charm-offense diplomacy than many US allies.

Keywords
China, United States, diplomacy, Bush, Obama

Introduction

The relationship between China and the United States has undergone dramatic changes during the last six decades: hostilities in the 1950s and 1960s; a semi-strategic alliance during the 1970s and 1980s; and deepening economic interdependence in the post-Cold War years, which even led some observers to claim that a ‘Chimerica’1 or a ‘G2’2 is emerging. In this context, dealing with the United States has always been a top priority for Chinese leaders and diplomats, which also necessitated and generated a great number of research works in China on the United States’ diplomacy.

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This article does not seek to capture all of the different views within China about US diplomacy; rather, it aims to piece together a mainstream Chinese perspective about American diplomacy, which — the author believes — shapes China’s diplomatic conduct of its relations with the United States. In doing so, the article mainly uses Chinese books, journal articles, newspaper reports and, occasionally, opinion polls. The article starts with a general Chinese view of US diplomacy and diplomats, followed by more specific discussions about US diplomacy towards China in the twenty-first century, during the eight-year Bush administration and the current Obama administration.

The US Diplomatic Tradition

The Chinese discern five key, recurring elements in the US diplomatic tradition:

1) *Quest for Primacy*

Chinese observers pointed out a contradictory feature of American behaviour: ‘practising democracy at home while exercising hegemony abroad’. The quest for primacy has been seen as a central theme of US diplomacy, evolving from a search for regional primacy towards a global one. For Chinese researchers on American diplomatic history, the general view is that isolationism in the early stage of US diplomacy never rejected internationalism or the quest for primacy *per se*. On the contrary, the United States pursued a robust westward expansion in North America, and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 showcased a perfect combination of isolationism and internationalism at an early stage of US history: ‘Isolation from Europe is to safeguard its action for freedom of expansion in America’.

The end of the Second World War made the quest for global primacy the dominating theme of US diplomacy. As Yang Jiemin, President of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), asserted, ‘as a superpower, the US international strategy can be summarized in one sentence: to maintain its leadership position in the world’. To go further, Zhu Mingquan, a professor at Fudan University, identified the two distinguishable fashions of the primacy strategy: leadership and dominance. A ‘world leadership strategy’ aims to pursue relative security, with more self-restraint and prudence about using military force; while a ‘world domination strategy’ pursues absolute security, placing more faith in the use of

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