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# How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?

By YAN XUETONG

BEIJING — Since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, Chinese analysts have been debating whether China should take on more international responsibility. Two opposite schools of thought have emerged within China.

On the one hand, a growing chorus of critics question China's decades-old foreign policy doctrine, first put forth by Deng Xiaoping, that stresses the importance of keeping a low profile on the world stage. These analysts say the nation needs to be more bold and assertive in international affairs in a way that matches China's newfound status as a major world power.

On the other hand is the Chinese mainstream, which says that the international calls for China to take on more international responsibilities is a conspiracy by Western countries intended to exhaust our economic resources by saddling it with more obligations abroad. An example of this philosophy is the fact that since the Cold War ended the Chinese representative to the United Nations often abstains from voting at the U.N. Security Council.

I'm firmly in the first camp, the minority of thinkers who think it is necessary for China to take on more responsibilities abroad. If China wants to regain its historical status as a great world power, it must act like a great world power.

Our group of thinkers draws inspiration from ancient Chinese philosophy, which regards both material capability and morality as necessary conditions for building strong and durable global leadership. For the sake of making itself a rising power that is welcomed by the rest of the world, China should act as a humane authority (*wang* in Chinese) and take on more international responsibilities to improve its strategic credibility.

The idea for a more assertive role appears to be gaining influence. A few years ago, almost no Chinese scholar challenged the principle of nonintervention, of infringing on the sovereignty of other nations. Recently there are more and more debates on this issue. Both the academic and the policy community debated sanctions on North Korea, the no-fly zone in Libya, and the proper government response to the 2009 attacks on ethnic Chinese in Myanmar.

The new debate on China's international role has coincided with changes in policy.

Soon after Japan's devastating earthquake, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao expressed deep sympathy and solicitude to the Japanese government and the people. Chinese rescue teams were mobilized and sent to help with the recovery process, and the Chinese Red Cross donated funds to Japan. Even Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie publicly offered possible military rescue help. The Chinese media has been flooded with sympathetic accounts of Japanese civility in the midst of disasters.

China's response to the Libya crisis is an even more striking example. On Feb. 26, the Chinese representative to the United Nations quickly voted for the U.N. sanctions against the Qaddafi government. Although China reverted to its normal posture by abstaining from the U.N. vote on taking military action against Libya, the endorsement of sanctions showed opposition to the Libyan government's harsh military response to the people's request that Qaddafi step down.

Moreover, for the first time China dispatched a warship and four military aircraft to evacuate Chinese citizens from Libya. From Feb. 22 to March 5, China evacuated 35,860 nationals and 2,100 foreigners from 12 other countries.

China's policy on Libya is clearly a break from the principle of keeping-low-profile. Sending military forces to Libya for evacuation implied that China has learned how to improve its international image. Even those Chinese who think we should continue to keep a low profile did not oppose sending military forces to Libya. It seems the Chinese government learned that international responsibility is mainly defined by political responses to international crises, especially security issues, rather than simply economic aid to poor countries.

For much of the 20th century, Chinese Marxists and liberals looked to the West for inspiration. Such Western values as state sovereignty were adopted as part of the government discourse because China had to build up its domestic power free from bullying by outside powers. But today, there is increased recognition of the fact that China must exercise positive influence on international affairs.

Of course, several factors explain China's shift from a self-absorbed power obsessed with sovereignty to an influential international actor, not least of which is China's growing economic might. But traditional Chinese values help Chinese leaders to make sense of the new emphasis on international responsibility and to channel China's policies in morally desirable ways.

There is evidence to support this analysis. Many years after Marx's picture was moved from Tiananmen Square, the statue of Confucius was set up there.

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