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China, US must play dynamic global role

SMU Prof says China, US need to focus on common global problems, not power competition

THE rapid rise of China in the last two decades had given rise to talk that eventually, it will go to war with the US, the world's current dominant superpower.

But James Tang, a political science professor who is Dean of the Singapore Management University's (SMU) School of Social Sciences, thinks otherwise.

He points out that the US is in no danger of being removed as a superpower anytime soon, and China has risen in a remarkably peaceful way.

Moreover, there are broader international forces at work like environmental and public health issues that China and the US, along with other countries, have to deal with together.

"We can't be too focused on power rivalry. This is not particularly helpful. The world has changed a great deal and we have to deal with other kinds of challenging global problems and that's a major focus of the kind of research work we do at the School of Social Sciences in SMU and what we want to prepare our students for," Prof Tang says.

"In the case of China's ascendancy to a global power, it is not a question of one power removing another but that there is now a whole system with established norms and institutions."

For example, China is starting to become more responsible about its environment as it becomes an important investor in many different parts of the world.

"There is more talk about corporate social responsibility by Chinese companies operating overseas. For example, (Telco equipment provider) Huawei, and major Chinese banks are becoming more willing to embrace that idea," he notes.

Power transition theory

Current thinking about how great powers behave towards each other is characterised as power transition theory. This refers to the idea that war is likely when a challenger to the dominant power appears, as seen in many times in history.

A rising, selfish China hungry for more resources will become more aggressive and eventually clash with the US, theorists argue. Prof Tang subscribes to another school of thought that argues that global institutions can ensure long-term interests of peace triumph. Even as China is becoming more assertive globally, it faces new challenges, he says.

"There are real serious problems on the ground like poverty and uneven socioeconomic development, as well as environmental issues. Resources also need to be in place within the international community to deal with virus outbreaks. The World Health Organization has certain procedures and information sharing. Even in Singapore we have haze issues, water scarcity and food security issues.

"Traditional power transition theorists tend not to

take these things into their discussions... the reality is that while states are still powerful as public goods providers and major powers have greater responsibilities in addressing global problems, the power distribution issue in international politics should not be separated from the provision of public goods.

China can be encouraged to play a more active role in these global problems, he says.

"I'm not suggesting war and peace problems will disappear from the world stage, but I'm saying that a rising power doesn't mean more conflicts. It's also to China's advantage to be seen as dealing with these kind of problems, and not just as a rising power bullying and taking advantage of other states."

Doing research on international relations between China and the US and how it could be linked to global problems has become somewhat of a pet project for Prof Tang, who was born in colonial Hong Kong to Singaporean parents and lived there when he was young.

"My parents are Singaporean but went to Beijing in the early days before Singapore's independence, as patriotic overseas Chinese wanting to help the motherland," he says.

But the bitterly cold Beijing weather, together with the social isolation his parents faced as outsiders, and disillusionment of the political situation in China at that time, caused them to move to Hong Kong, he recalls.

"I always had this fascination about what actually happened in China. That led me to have an interest in understanding political developments in China and political science in general."

Prof Tang was trained by academics subscribing to the "realist" school of thought in international relations - those who believed that in the global arena, states are preoccupied with seeking more power and resources to survive in an international environment characterised as anarchical. The arms race that results will lead to war even if nobody wants it, realists posit.

But he was soon involved in work that complicated this view of the world. Around the year 2000, Prof Tang did extensive fieldwork on China's foreign policy, from a bottom-up perspective by looking at the external relations of Chinese provinces.

"My hypothesis was that for a country as big as China, provinces in the North-east and South-west will have different geopolitical interests. The North-east would be far more concerned about what's going on in Korea and the Russian Far East. The South-west would be more concerned with Indo-China, South-east Asia, and provinces like Guangdong and Fujian will have far stronger links overseas especially through the network of Chinese Diasporas," he says.

'It is not a question of one power removing another but that there is now a whole system with established norms and institutions.'

- Professor James Tang (above), Dean of the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences

"I visited individual provinces, talking to people in charge of foreign trade, investment, tourism, education, relations with overseas Chinese. I went through documentary sources, reports, publicly available documents.

"Local officials say they support the national agenda and follow the directives but if you look at the specifics, you know they have different interests in the relationships they cultivate. It confirmed my assumptions that local governments in different parts of China have a more complicated external relations agenda than what is commonly perceived."

It was also interesting to study how local governments sometimes band together to lobby the central government, he adds.

"That project led to observations that this is a country rising and becoming more successful, but foreign policy decision-making in China is not simply a matter of national leaders issuing orders in Beijing," he says.

Internal strife

On China's internal politics, Prof Tang thinks that while there is tremendous frustration in Chinese society over the lack of opportunities and rising inequality, China does not appear to be in danger of collapsing immediately as a Communist Party-run entity yet.

"The discontent in the country has not generated coherent, organised opposition forces that would overthrow the Party," he says. "I don't see any equivalent of the Arab Spring taking place. Institutions in general are still effective, there is still continuing economic progress."

In fact, some political scientists have been trying to explain why China's political system is still working despite the various challenges it is facing, he says. Prof Tang cited prominent Harvard University scholar of Chinese history and politics, Elizabeth Perry as an example. The academic who was a visiting professor at SMU has done extensive research on China's grassroots and popular protests.

"Grassroots social resistance demonstrations provided a vent for people's frustrations and also serve as a means for the central government to keep their fingers on the pulse of potential problems," Prof Tang says, summing up her arguments.

"The credibility of the central government is still relatively high and complaints are often directed at local officials. If the central government can move in and resolve problems, their legitimacy could be strengthened."

But in a more diverse society, it is getting harder for the Chinese government to suppress alternate views and just assume the role of provider, he says. People are worried they cannot get a good education and good jobs for their children, on top of

having to deal with food security and air pollution problems.

"So people are quite frustrated, particularly the growing middle class. They feel they made it and have more resources, but the quality of their lives seems not to be improving as fast. They are also more worried about the future of their children."

The recent Third Plenum policy land reforms, where farmers have more say over non-agricultural land rights, will address inequality somewhat. But moving to key cities like Beijing and Shanghai is still difficult without money or connections, he says.

Intellectuals are getting worried, Prof Tang says. "I went to a couple of bookshops frequented by intellectuals and college students in Beijing. Best-selling titles included one on the final year of the Soviet Union. I guess people are interested in the possible parallel. I was told that Animal Farm, by George Orwell, was selling well in another bookshop."

Looking ahead, Prof Tang says he is continuing to bring experiences in solving real-life issues and practical policy problems to SMU political science students, instead of simply focusing on classroom work. For example, students participating in a joint class between SMU and the University of Southern California (USC) last year worked together on a report on US relations with East Asia by doing policy research and talking to experts in the field. They presented their recommendations in a public forum organised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

"This year, the joint class will visit Washington to meet those from the policy-community and spend time at USC in Los Angeles before we return to Singapore for more work and for our public presentation," he says.

"Former President SR Nathan who is Distinguished Senior Fellow at the School interacts with our students and faculty, and we have also appointed Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan, foreign policy advisor and former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as Senior Fellow to provide our students more opportunities to interact with practitioners."

"Academia has to change. We need to generate knowledge that is relevant and equip our students for real world challenges," he adds.

This is the seventh in a monthly series by the Singapore Management University. Next month's feature on February 19 will discuss taxation issues with a look ahead on Singapore Budget 2014



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