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China

The Chinese equation

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Discussion with Gilbert Achcar, professor at the School of Oriental and African studies of the University of London (SOAS).

How should we judge the rise to power of China, positively or negatively?

That depends on the point of view that you start from. The rise to power of China will be judged in a different way according to whether you look at it from the point of view of the United States, of Europe, or the Third World. It will take on a different significance according to the perspective adopted, economic or politico-military. From an anti-imperialist point of view, one can say that the rise to power of China, insofar as it contributes to rebalancing a world that had become unipolar after the fall of the USSR, is unquestionably positive. From an economic standpoint, China, from the considerable weight that it has acquired in the world economy, plays an incontestably positive role. This could be verified again at the time of the last world economic crisis. The big question is to know whether this rise to power of China is likely to exacerbate a cold war dynamic which already exists, but which could be aggravated and lead to strong political and military tensions that would be dangerous for humanity.

Some experts envisage that in 2025 the American and Chinese economic curves will intersect. Is there not a risk of cold war and confrontation?

Some people envisage that it will happen even earlier than that. The Chinese economy once again experienced a very high growth rate in 2010, almost 10 per cent, provoking fresh fears of overheating. If this strong growth lasts, the intersection could thus take place very soon. We can see on this subject, on the Western side, a certain anguish, caused by seeing - for the first time since the emergence of industrial capitalism - a country with a political system that is different from that of the Western democracies becoming the leading economy in the world. This is something completely new, in a world where this status was held by Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States since then, and up until today. Does this rise to power of China automatically imply a risk of cold war? From the point of view in international relations that is known as structuralist, the rise of a new power inevitably creates tension with the power that exists, within the framework of relationships of forces that are conceived of as a "zero sum game". I think however that it is not a question of structural inevitability, but of a political decision. In the last analysis, what is decisive is the attitude adopted by the power of the moment, namely the United States. The attitude of Washington is decisive: it has been up to now, and it is increasingly the case The United States, today as yesterday, tries to thwart this rise of China. They have put in place what is perceived, seen from Beijing, as a strategic encirclement. If they maintain this behaviour, the cold war dynamic, which already exists, will certainly become sharper. I entitled my 1999 book, published just after the war in Kosovo, "The New Cold War". This formula of "new cold war" designated the increasing tensions between Moscow and Beijing on the one hand and Washington on the other. The evolution of the international situation seems me to have confirmed this prognosis on the tendency of politico-military relations between these powers. With what was called the "unipolar moment", the triumphalism of the United States inspired a hegemonic policy not only towards the traditional vassals of Washington, but also towards Moscow and Beijing, and not only under the administration of George W. Bush, but since 1990-91. The conduct of this imperial policy by George W. Bush led to the disastrous balance-sheet that we know, even putting into question the credibility of the United States as a "superpower". The economic crisis has further reinforced this loss of prestige. Today Washington is proceeding to a re-examination of its policy, with the Obama administration inclined to adopt a more conciliatory attitude with regard to Moscow and Beijing. In the long term, either Washington succeeds, in the interest of the whole world as well as that of the population of the United States, in adapting to an international modus vivendi on the basis of collective institutions, of the UN and international law, and the dynamics of cold war could be stopped; or else Washington, in particular after a change of personnel at the top (which is possible in the short term), continues to

follow an aggressive policy on the borders of China and Russia, in which case it is obvious that the dynamics of cold war will intensify. For the moment, China is far from parity with the United States on the military level. The latter remains the leading world military power, and by a long chalk, spending in this field the equivalent of the expenditure of the rest of the world. Chinese military expenditure is very modest compared to American military expenditure. It is nevertheless progressing quickly, in parallel with the economic position of China. In this respect, it is the total volume of GDP which is decisive, and not GDP per capita, on which level China will remain for a long time yet far from the United States. US military expenditure amounts to almost 5 per cent of GDP, which is enormous. With China's GDP tending to catch up with, and soon surpass that of the United States, Beijing will be able soon to increase its military expenditure to the equivalent of Washington's, and even beyond. A new planetary arms race would increase considerably the already enormous volume of world military expenditure, to the detriment of the development and the wellbeing of populations, without forgetting that you do not accumulate armaments without that not leading to wars, direct or by proxy, in a climate of confrontation such as that which opposed the United States and the USSR.

Would a Chinese desire for hegemony be realizable, beyond a simple rebalancing with the United States?

The first question which should be posed is to know whether there really exists a Chinese desire for hegemony. Obviously for the hawks of the Western world, this desire is given as a starting postulate. But if we observe China's behaviour in a more neutral, more objective way, we really do not find evidence to support such a characterization. Admittedly the behaviour of China includes an unstoppable logic of economic expansion, in the sense that the dynamism of its economy and its exports provide it with an immense monetary reserve. And it needs fructify this reserve, no longer- or less and less - by acquiring American treasury bills, as it has done on a large scale over the last few years. China has in fact subsidized the deficit of the American budget. It has thus, to some extent, subsidized the armaments and the wars of the United States. The foreign-exchange reserves of Beijing are very close to 3000 billion dollars today, which is gigantic. China is doing today what the capitalist economies at the end of the nineteenth century did, in their "imperialist" mutation. As it has an enormous amount of money to invest, it is no longer satisfied to export goods, but increasingly exports capital, whether towards developing countries or towards Western economies, and even offers to re-inflate countries like Greece and Portugal. It hopes in return for better access to international markets, the development of commercial exchanges, privileged access to raw materials, and the political influence that goes with that. The loans for aid to development lavished by China today exceed those of the World Bank. On the military level however, that has not, or not yet, been expressed in the manner of the imperialism of the end of the nineteenth century, by militarism and gunboat diplomacy aimed at extending politico-military domination. There is not yet anything comparable in the attitude of China. China's priorities in the military sphere are primarily of a defensive nature: China's obsession today is encirclement by America. The United States controls the energy sources of China, in particular the Middle East on which China is much more dependent for its oil than is the United States. It is a striking paradox that China is the principal customer of the Saudi kingdom, which is an American protectorate on the politico-military level. The United States has its hands on most of the taps which feed oil to China. It controls the maritime routes of China's trade. That obviously worries Beijing. China is surrounded by American military bases, from Central Asia and Afghanistan to Japan. It fears that the United States is seeking to compensate for or slow down its loss of economic supremacy by economic or other forms of obstruction, based on its military supremacy. American blackmail could thus affect energy sources, trade and many other aspects (technology, etc). In the field of naval power, the United States has an enormous force of projection: it has eleven aircraft carriers, whereas China does not have any. America's naval strength is a force of projection of power. That is not the case for China, whose logic is defensive. The Chinese are developing their fleet of submarines, which is the naval arm in which they come closest to parity, at least on the quantitative level, with what the United States has. They are in the course of developing a ground-to-sea ballistic missile against the US aircraft carriers. This is a way for them of avoiding American naval domination. I go back to the starting point of my argument: the ball is in the court of the United States, and the Americans are still able to fashion the world as they affirmed in their strategic documents of the 1990s. They still have the initiative; they are the ones who, up until now, set the rules of the game. Either they choose to adopt a new attitude, understanding that the "unipolar moment" was only an ephemeral "moment", and that

it is advisable to build a framework of peaceful international relations on the basis of collective institutions, with the rules of the game applicable to everyone. Or else they continue their foolish attempt to prevent any emergence of a strategic equal. In that case, the dynamics of cold war can only worsen and even degenerate.

Can't Europeans maintain closer relations with China, which could make it possible to loosen the grip of the United States?

This is in any case what Beijing wants. Its intervention to contribute to re-inflating the euro is part of its desire to promote a multipolar world, a desire that Moscow shares. Strategic multipolarity flows from economic multipolarity. China's currency is starting its mutation into an international currency. This economic approach shows that Beijing is well-disposed towards Europe, and that it wants to develop with it a partnership based on mutual interests. It is up to Europe to know how to grasp this outstretched hand. That implies calling into question its alignment behind the United States, which has lasted for decades. Europe could turn the page on this alignment behind Washington, and understand that another policy is essential in order to build a twenty-first century which cannot be a new American century. It is a question of political choice, because there is no structural automatism. We are all directly concerned.

*Interview conducted by Jacques Le Dauphin,
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