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Q. and A.: Yan Xuetong Urges China to Adopt a More Assertive Foreign Policy

Sinosphere

By YUFAN HUANG FEB. 9, 2016

Yan Xuetong, the director of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing, argues for a more assertive foreign policy for China in his latest book, "The Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition." In the book, which the Chinese state news media has reviewed favorably, he advocates what he calls moral realism as a rising China challenges the United States for world leadership. This approach would combine a greater emphasis on forging military partnerships abroad while building a more humane society at home.

Mr. Yan, 64, holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, Berkeley, and in 2008 was listed among the world's top 100 public intellectuals by Foreign Policy magazine. In an interview, he explained why it is time for China to cut back on economic aid to other countries, why North Korea is not China's ally and why he sees rivalry but not war with the United States:

Q. You say that China should establish military alliances, like the United States does. China already provides military assistance to Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and some members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

and is building a naval support installation in Djibouti. Should China have military bases in these countries?

A. For its own interests, China should consider having military bases in countries it considers allies. Unfortunately, the Chinese government insists on a nonalliance principle. It's too early to say where China would build military bases, since China now has only one real ally, Pakistan.

Q. *You say that North Korea is not an ally despite the alliance treaty signed between the two countries in 1961. Why?*

A. In 2013, China publicly denied that it had an alliance with North Korea and declared that the two simply had "normal relations." The two countries' leaders haven't met for years, and that's not how allies behave. China's relations with North Korea are worse than those with South Korea, which is an ally of the United States.

Q. *What's holding China back from forming alliances?*

A: Some believe it's due to a lack of military might, but I think it comes from not seeking truth from facts. The nonalliance principle adopted by the Chinese government in 1982 was the right strategy when China was a very weak power and served the country's interests well for two decades. But since then China has become the world's second-largest power, and the nonalliance principle no longer serves its interests. The major obstacle to China abandoning its nonalliance principle is years of propaganda criticizing alliances as part of a Cold War mentality.

Q. *How can China acquire more allies? Provide more economic and military aid?*

A. It's impossible to change the nature of China's relations with other countries with just economic assistance or loans. So I don't think China's One Belt, One Road initiative for economic development across Eurasia can

fundamentally change the nature of the relations.

Q. You said recently that China should reduce its economic assistance to other countries. Why?

A. I think China should limit its economic assistance, including outright aid and loans, to 1 percent of its annual foreign reserves, which amounted to about \$35 billion in 2015. The current amount has been way too high given China's capabilities. In most cases, loans to underdeveloped countries end up being written off rather than repaid.

We should scale back this economic assistance and switch to military aid. Military aid should be given to friendly countries to improve strategic cooperation and secure political support. But China should be very cautious about participating in military conflicts in the Middle East. China should learn a lesson from Russia's military involvement in Syria.

Q. How would China abandoning its nonalliance policy change the dynamics between China and United States?

A. Any change would only be positive. The more allies China makes, the more balanced and stable the relationship will be. The more China shies away from alliances, the greater the chance that Washington will contain China, therefore resulting in an unstable relationship.

There won't be a direct war between the two sides, because they're both armed with nuclear weapons. The problem now is that the two are not willing to admit that they're in competition. They're still pretending to be friends.

During U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to China in 2011, Xi Jinping suggested the idea of "healthy competition" between China and the United States, and this was well received by Biden. When both sides define the nature of their relationship as competition rather than cooperation, they have lower expectations of the other's friendly actions and higher tolerance of the other's

hostile actions. Thus both sides will be cautious about provoking the other side and will avoid allowing conflicts to escalate to disaster.

Unfortunately, “healthy competition” was later replaced by a “new type of great power relations” [Mr. Xi’s proposal of a relationship between equals based on cooperation and avoiding confrontation] and the chance for stabilizing bilateral relations perished.

Q. In recent years, some of China’s neighbors seem to have felt less secure because of China’s greater assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea. Has the Chinese approach backfired?

A. It’s only the Philippines and Vietnam that have major disputes with China in the South China Sea, and they’re just two of China’s more than 30 neighbors. Singapore and Thailand, two longtime allies of the United States in the region, have become much closer to China in recent years.

China’s South China Sea policy is only intended to safeguard its own interests, so I don’t think it’s overly assertive, but rather that previous policies were not forceful enough.

The South China Sea dispute is just an obstacle on China’s path to greater power, which the United States has been unwilling to accept. It is a result, rather than the cause, of the rivalry between China and the United States. It will be up to the United States to decide if it wants to go to war with China for the sake of the Philippines and Vietnam. It’s not China’s call. The United States recently gave its support to Japan for its involvement in the South China Sea, which means the United States has not decided to confront China directly there.

Q. You say that moral realism means building a better society at home, under a form of leadership based on an ancient Chinese philosophy called humane authority. What does that mean specifically?

A. Moral realism involves leading by example, which means China needs to practice the moral principles it advocates to the world both at home and abroad. The core principles suggested by moral realism are fairness, justice and civility. Equality, democracy and freedom are also important principles advocated by moral realism.

Moral realism suggests that the essence of democracy should be the same for all countries including China, even though it takes different forms. The essence is that political leadership should be corrected by criticism from the people.

In ancient China, remonstrance officials enjoyed immunity from punishment while delivering complaints directly to the emperor. Freedom of speech is necessary for a humane authority, but the remonstrance official system is more important because it's a more efficient way of correcting strategic mistakes than freedom of speech.

Q. *Wouldn't a "humane authority" lead the world by doing what is widely considered right? For example, should China sanction North Korea for its recent nuclear test?*

A. That would be a Western hegemonic idea. A humane authority sees everyone on equal terms. If North Korea is not entitled to nuclear weapons, then China and the United States should guarantee North Korea its security in return for denuclearization. That's what we call leading by example and fairness. It's only Western countries that are calling for sanctions without considering a fair solution, and they make up only about 20 percent of the world's 195 countries.

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