Chinese leader denies any aim to replace the US as world hegemon

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In a major 9,000-word essay published on the Chinese foreign ministry's web site on December 6, State Councilor Dai Bingguo (whose rank is equal to vice premier) declared that Beijing would never seek to replace the US as the world's dominant power. The essay was designed to placate the American ruling elite, which is engaged in an aggressive campaign throughout Asia to combat China's rise.

"The notion that China will overtake the US and dominate the world is a myth," Dai wrote. "Our fundamental policy and strategy is to not take the lead and not seek hegemony." In an attempt to counter US criticism of Beijing's "secretive" intentions, especially its military buildup, Dai insisted: "China's so-called strategic intent is not as complicated and abysmal as some people imagine—as if we have some secret agenda and ambitions." He said China's strategic goal of "peaceful development" would not change, even in 1,000 years.

Dai argued that under conditions of globalisation, "the rise of a power can be fully achieved through equal, ordered and mutually beneficial international competition and cooperation". He added: "The experiences and lessons of the rise and fall of some powers taught us that we cannot follow the road of expansionism, and arms races."

Dai said China would not seek a "Monroe Doctrine" in Asia—referring to the 19th and 20th century US policy to exclude rival powers from South and Latin America—"nor compete for dominance in our region with other countries". He promised that China would be "a good friend, good neighbour and good partner" for Asian countries, especially members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Beijing published the essay amid sharpening tensions on the Korean peninsula, after the November 23 artillery exchange between the two Koreas. The Obama administration has increasingly accused China of being responsible for North Korea's supposedly "rogue" behaviour. Large-scale joint US military exercises with South Korea and Japan have sent a threatening message to the Chinese regime. In addition, the US and its allies have rejected China's proposal to resume six-party talks over North Korea to ease frictions.

The US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks have also revealed active American discussion about preparing for war against China. Expressing concern that China held $2 trillion in US currency assets, including US government debt, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2009: "How do you deal toughly with your banker?" Rudd replied that if China could not be integrated into the US-led Asia-Pacific order, Washington and its allies would have to use force against Beijing.

Dai has been involved in diplomatic manoeuvres in recent months, aiming at defusing mounting regional tensions. In October, he met informally on Hainan Island with Clinton, who was in Asia to strengthen US relations in the region, from Vietnam and Cambodia to Australia, and undercut Chinese influence. Dai's essay could be part of Beijing's efforts to ensure that President Hu Jintao's planned January visit to Washington proceeds, as any further escalation of tensions between the two countries could derail the visit.

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Dai argued that China's rise over the past three decades had "broken the historic law that new rising powers must inevitably lead to plunder, aggression and hegemony". This conception, however, that Beijing can avoid conflict with Washington, runs completely counter to the lessons of history.

The very growth of the Chinese economy is driving a collision course. One-eighth of the US economy a decade ago, China's economy is now one third of the US, and overtook Japan this year as the world's second largest. China's expansion has necessarily led it to secure sources of oil and raw materials from Africa, Oceania, the Middle East and Latin America, and also made it heavily dependent on exporting its manufactured goods to the US and Europe. In order to protect vital sea lanes, Beijing is building a blue-water navy, posing a challenge to the US naval dominance in the Asia-Pacific region following World War II. To guarantee stable supplies of resources and access to naval ports, China has provided loans and arms to various regimes, from Iran to Sri Lanka and Sudan, undercutting US influence.

A diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks provides an example of the US response. It was sent from a US consulate in Nigeria in February following the visit of Johnnie Carson, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs. "China is a very aggressive and pernicious economic competitor with no morals," Carson told a group of American oil executives in Nigeria, warning of China's rising influence in Africa. Relaying Carson's view, the cable asked: "Is China developing a blue-water navy? Have they signed military base agreements? Are they training armies? Have they developed intelligence operations?" Although the cable stated that Washington does not yet view China as a military threat in Africa, "once these areas start developing, then the United States will start worrying."

With its economic decline accelerating since the 2008 financial crisis, the US is actively seeking to undermine China's rising influence. Like the British Empire, which ended only after two world wars, the US will not voluntarily relinquish global dominance.

A section of the Chinese ruling elite has warned that the country's further economic development will not be peaceful. Just three days after Dai's essay, the state-run *Global Times*, known for its hawkish positions on foreign policy, interviewed a Chinese general, Peng Guangqian, who warned against the "illusion of peace". Peng argued that globalised production and economic interdependence between nations "cannot fundamentally eliminate the cause of war," which was rooted in the "expansionist nature of monopolistic capitalism". Secondly, he said, "China will not challenge the US hegemony, but this does mean the American hegemon won't challenge China." Thirdly, although "China sincerely wishes for a peaceful rise," the problem was "not 'whether you want peace', but the fact that some people fundamentally are unable to accept your rise".

Peng's interview underscores the objective fact that the Chinese capitalist elite's determination to advance their position as a world power means conflict with the US. With the US losing its economic superiority over its rivals, Washington has increasingly turned to military means to shore up its position. Regardless of its pacifist appeal, Dai's essay will not eliminate the rising tensions between the two countries.

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