

The People's Republic of China and the World

Ivan Šimonović*

Original paper
UDC 327(510:4:497.5)
Received in October 2003

China is a state with a population of one billion and three hundred million people, with a civilisation that dates back five thousand years and with the fastest growth rate in the world. Another piece of information one can find striking: it has the greatest number of mobile telephones. These statistics demonstrate that already today China plays a major role in international affairs and, according to all indications, it will play an even more important role in the future. China has recently become a member of the World Trade Organisation, a circumstance that lends a new dynamism to China's trade and other relations and will in all likelihood have a beneficial effect on the trade volume and economic development. What is quite evident, in any case, is that ever since it began to open up in 1978, China has been making giant steps in economic growth and there is no reason to believe that this rapid progress will come to a halt. Of course, the period since 1978 has not been uniform in character. There were a number of events of which we can say that they threatened to a certain extent this favourable trend in China. The unfortunate events in Tien An Men Square, as well as the Taiwan crisis in 1996, were extremely serious. However, in one way or another, China managed to overcome all difficulties, to regain stability after each crisis, so that we still look upon China as a stable country, in which the fourth generation of Chinese leaders have taken up their places.

Key words: China, international relations, relations China-Croatia

1. Introduction

In the words of a Chinese official whom I had the pleasure to speak with during my recent visit to China, in the next 20 years a priority task will be to continue the present trend of fast economic development, including also the development of a prosperous society that is well equipped to meet the needs and protect the interests of all population strata. The society good for everybody is called *Xiao Kang* in Chinese terminology. For the realisation of such a society China primarily needs to ensure stability, both in its internal relations and on the international scene. The current situation in China is characterised by the endeavours to maintain social stability in the present period of turbulent transition, a period of major economic transformation. This is no easy task,

considering that these changes do not affect only the economy: there is no doubt that the value system of the people is also undergoing changes. This is a phenomenon which all countries in transition have had to face. To this should be added a circumstance specific to China, i.e. the market-oriented economy is combined with a one-party system. It goes without saying that this road produces some very specific tensions. How to advance the rule of law in such a context, how to promote the protection of human and minority rights? How to ensure the evolution of institutions and adapt them to the new needs and challenges, while at the same preserving social stability?

2. Greatest challenge of Chinese society

What is the greatest challenge Chinese society will have to face in the next 20 years? Most prob-

* Croatia's Deputy Foreign Minister and the professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb.

ably it will be the differences in the level of development of the various parts of the giant that is China. That is why the intention of the Chinese leadership to try and accelerate the development of the western provinces in the coming period in order to break the tension that has been created by the vast differences in the level of development between China's coastal belt and the rest of the country is quite understandable. At the same time, by speeding up development in the rest of China and by mobilising all resources of that country it will be possible to ensure the anticipated growth rate, and thus to produce a positive effect on internal stability. As long as the present growth rate is maintained, as long as the population can enjoy a higher and higher standard every year, it is believed that the internal situation in China will remain stable. However, the economic growth ought to be accompanied by systematic institutional reforms, which will also have a positive effect on improving the quality of life.

As regards international stability, China is evidently making efforts to arrive at an arrangement with all its great partners that would warrant stability to China and unhampered economic growth. First, let us take a look at Chinese-American relations. After a period of tension in Chinese-American relations, following on Tien An Men, after the Taiwanese crisis in 1996, after the intervention in Kosovo and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, September 11 constituted a certain turning point. After that event, relations between China and the US have been following an upward trend; communication has been increasingly successful, both on a security and political level and in the economic field. We are increasingly witnessing cases of successful cooperation between the US and China in resolving crises in other parts of the world. This does not refer only to antiterrorist activities but also to the tense situation in North Korea, which is dealt with further in the text.

The same progress and stability can be seen in the relations between China and the Russian Federation. Some Chinese leaders say that the current stage is the most stable period in the history of Chinese-Russian relations, based on common sense and common interests. Some of the past stages marked by ideological-euphoric phrases about closeness and understanding were followed by disappointment and alienation. The present relations are not of that type, they are based on common interests of both states and can guarantee long-term stability.

3. China – Europe - World

As for the European Union, China is interested in the successful integration of Europe as this, in their view, contributes to a desirable multipolarity. In this context, Croatian greater closeness to the EU is also favourably viewed.

Relations between China and India are also progressing in a satisfactory manner. It was just during my stay in China that the Indian Prime Minister paid a visit. On that occasion a major breakthrough was achieved in their relations in general, and particularly with respect to Tibet, with India accepting the administrative autonomy of Tibet within China, even though it continues to give refuge to the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile.

And finally, China's multilateral priorities are clearly defined. China attaches great importance to the United Nations Organisation, to the Security Council and to the principle of sovereign equality of states. This short overview of Chinese foreign policy can be illustrated by three concrete examples which demonstrate how the principles and stands we are speaking about are applied in practice: these three examples concern China's position on the intervention in Iraq, on the crisis in North Korea, and Chinese reaction to SARS.

Regarding Iraq, China's position was built on the importance it attaches to the UN system and to the authority of the Security Council. This is the reason China opposed armed intervention without the clear authorisation by the Security Council. At the same time, however, bearing in mind its global interests and the importance of bilateral cooperation with the US, China carefully balanced its steps so as not to seem partial and perceived as a state that is willing to enter into any coalition with the aim of creating a political threat to the United States. In short, Iraq was a topic on which China had a position but was not willing to be too active. It did not concern its direct sphere of interest, and it had to protect its bilateral interests.

The second example: North Korea. A completely different situation. North Korea is an area of particular interest to China, and China is active there. However, what does this activity consist of? Regardless of its good relations with North Korea, China takes the principled stand of endorsing the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and sees in North Korean nuclear armaments the threat of a potential nuclear stampede in its close neighbourhood. Hence the activity it developed, but not in the shape of solo performances but of active cooperation with others in the search for acceptable solutions. There was successful cooperation between China and the USA

in the efforts to find a peaceful solution, and I think we can already say that some progress has been made. North Korea has agreed, namely, to what it had formerly always refused: to be willing to use multilateral instruments in settling issues concerning its nuclear weapons.

And finally, SARS. In my opinion, SARS offered a good insight into the two Chinas, the old China and the new China. Old China was revealed at the onset of the crisis, old China that was non-transparent, somewhat entrenched in the sense of insisting on its sovereignty and on the right to deal with its problems exclusively within its own boundaries. Old China and its methods proved to be misjudged, and in the next stage of the efforts to suppress the epidemic it was "new China" that appeared on stage. The new China, which informed its citizens of the danger that threatened, which employed efficient preventive measures, exchanged information with other countries and cooperated well with the World Health Organisation. I believe that by its successful confrontation with the challenge of SARS China showed in the second stage what it could do, but also that it will take much more effort for new China to supersede old China.

4. China - Croatia

Lastly, let us to finish with a few comments about our bilateral relations. Relations between Croatia and China, between the Croats and the Chinese, have a long history, ever since the times of Marco Polo. It was just recently that we restored and inaugurated the house in which he was born on the Island of Korčula. A significant period in the development of our relations was after China's opening in 1978, when it saw in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia an interesting example of a socialist country experimenting with a market-oriented economy. Many leaders in China remember those times and mention that the only foreign films they saw were Romanian films and those from the SFRY, and that through cultural exchanges they developed a special attitude towards that part of the world. As regards political relations between Croatia and China, these relations are not burdened with any unresolved issues, while in crucial matters Croatia and China support each other. Croatia highly appreciates the Chinese support of Croatian territorial integrity and sovereignty at the time when they were seriously threatened. Likewise, from its inception, Croatia has advocated the principle of one China, provided, of course, that this principle is implemented together with appropriate mechanisms that take into consid-

eration the specific features and the autonomy of the different parts. On this issue, we are particularly glad to note a certain progress in the development of the dialogue on Tibet, and we would like to express our hope that this issue, too, will be soon successfully settled. The protection of human rights in general, and of specific ethnic rights in particular, constitute a prerequisite for the long-term stability of all states.

Concerning our bilateral economic cooperation, it could be said that it is expanding but expanding from a very low starting point. The volume of economic exchange is still very small and also, from the Croatian side, an exchange marked by a great imbalance between import and export. Croatia mostly imports from China a broad range of consumer goods, and after a period when Croatia exported to China a number of ships, there has been very little export from Croatian side. Currently, the largest part of Croatian exports to China are pharmaceuticals from Pliva, especially Sumamed. It is thus a good thing that steps are taken to bring our respective economic factors closer together, and this is why we particularly value China's appearance as Partner Country at the Zagreb Autumn Fair last year. We also welcome the meeting of the Mixed Committee on Economic Matters, which is scheduled to take place this autumn. Our cooperation is also boosted by high-level contacts and meetings. Thus, for example, the President of the Republic of Croatia, Stipe Mesić visited China last year. During my stay in China, we discussed the visit of the Croatian Prime Minister in the first half of next year, that is, after the parliamentary elections in Croatia, and President Mesić has extended to the Chinese President the invitation to visit Croatia.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, there is a strong belief that our cooperation will continue to flourish in many fields. It was a pleasure to learn that Beijing has been granted the honour of hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. This will be a good opportunity for many Croats to travel to Beijing, and those who are not so fortunate will at least have many opportunities to see this beautiful country and its capital in the numerous TV transmissions. ■