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**'HARMONIOUS SOCIETY' AND 'HARMONIOUS WORLD':  
CHINA'S POLICY DISCOURSE UNDER HU JINTAO**

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## SUMMARY

The policy discourse 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), and its foreign policy alter ego 'harmonious world' (*hexie shijie*) has become the defining discourse of the Chinese Communist Party under Hu Jintao. Following the reading of 'Decisions by the CCP Central Committee on Building Socialism and Harmonious Society, and Other Important Issues' by the Central Committee during the 6<sup>th</sup> plenum (Oct 2006), 'harmonious society' is now just short of being institutionalized in the CCP's charter (like Jiang's 'Three Represents'). 'Harmonious society' is widely anticipated to be the central theme of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress scheduled for October 2007.

'Harmonious society/world' thus follows in the footsteps of previous policy discourses to map out China's developmental direction, as well as setting the tone for national policies. In the realm of foreign policy, 'harmonious world' marks a shift in the leadership's understanding of China's position in the world, and correspondingly, its overall international strategy.

Whereas Deng Xiaoping's ideas like '*taoguang yanghui*' (literally, 'hiding one's capacity while biding one's time') and '*budangtou*' ('not seeking to lead') painted China as a passive participant in world affairs, Jiang Zemin subtly challenged this passivity by moving China forward to 'gear with the world' ('*yu shijie jiegui*') and expounding ideas such as 'developing China as a comprehensive power' (*fazhan zonghe guoli*) and 'building a new international order'. As the leadership passed from Jiang to Hu, the latter took the opportunity to reassess China's domestic and international realities.

These realities include many of those challenges caused by rapid socio-economic development and China's immersion in the globalisation process, that is, the consequences of Deng's and Jiang's policies. During the first two stages, other national concerns were superseded in favour of attaining rapid economic development and realigning China in the international community. Indeed, China has been so successful in these pursuits that by the late 1990s, the country was labelled the 'economic miracle' of the late twentieth century, but it has had little success in managing the social and political ills that came with economic achievement.

Hu inherited an increasingly divided society: widening regional disparities, a tattered social and welfare system, massive unemployment, structural poverty, and rising environmental concerns. On the foreign policy front, China was besieged with new externalities, from international terrorism and separatist movements to strategic containment, and massive trade imbalances to those speculative 'hot' monies that flow across international frontiers.

The need for a policy rethink spurred Hu's 'harmonious society/world' idea. China now needs to adjust its attitude: a more proactive role is now necessary if the country is to shape its own destiny, both internally and externally. 'Scientific development' (*kexue fazhanguan*) and 'harmonious society' serve to provide Hu's domestic audience with new developmental objectives; 'harmonious world' sends the signal that China is now moving into a new stage of development. This new mentality and approach—China finally 'going out'—is applicable to both China's domestic and foreign policies, three decades into its 'open door' policy.

For the moment, this shift appears to be confined to the economic and cultural spheres. Meanwhile, Beijing opts for a more cautious approach to putting itself

into the limelight by working within the current international framework through its membership in the UN and regional cooperative initiatives.

Due to China's increasingly diversified social and political lives, the idea of 'harmonious society/world' has been relatively more contested than its predecessors. Voices from the 'left' and 'right' have jumped in to offer interpretations of the idea. This is hampering efforts to achieve the desired uniformity in policy discourse within China. Given the importance of unified policy discourses to China's Leninist structure of governance, the efficacy of 'harmonious society/world' as a policy idea remains uncertain as Hu proceeds into his second term in office at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP.

## **'Harmonious Society' and 'Harmonious World': China's Policy Discourse under Hu Jintao**

### **China's Changing Development Direction**

- 1.1 The present policy discourse 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), and its foreign policy alter ego 'harmonious world' (*hexie shijie*) has become the defining discourse of Hu Jintao's reign as Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and State President of China. Following the reading of 'Decisions by the CCP Central Committee on Building Socialism and Harmonious Society, and Other Important Issues' by the Central Committee during the 6<sup>th</sup> plenum (Oct 2006), 'harmonious society' is now just short of being institutionalized in the CCP's charter (like Jiang's 'Three Represents'). 'Harmonious society' is widely anticipated to be the central theme of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress scheduled for October 2007.
- 1.2 'Harmonious society/world' thus follows in the footsteps of previous policy discourses to map out the direction of China's socio-economic development as well setting the tone for national policies. In the realm of foreign policy, 'harmonious world' marks a shift in the leadership's understanding of China's position in the world, and correspondingly, its overall international strategy.
- 1.3 Whereas Deng Xiaoping's ideas like '*taoguang yanghui*' (literally, 'hiding one's capacity while biding one's time') and '*budangtou*' ('not seeking to lead') painted China as a passive participant in world affairs, Jiang Zemin subtly challenged this passivity by moving China forward to 'gear with the world' ('*yu shijie jiegui*'), expounding ideas such as 'developing China as a comprehensive power' (*fazhan zonghe guoli*) and 'building a new international order'. As the leadership passed from Jiang to Hu, the latter took the opportunity to reassess China's domestic and international realities.
- 1.4 These realities include many of those challenges caused by rapid development and China's immersion in the globalisation process, that is, the consequences of Deng's and Jiang's policies. During the first two stages, other national concerns were superseded in favour of attaining rapid economic development and realigning China in the international

community. Indeed, China has been so successful in these pursuits that by the late 1990s, the country was labelled the 'economic miracle' of the late twentieth century, but has had little success in managing the social and political ills that came with economic achievement.

- 1.5 Beijing has also found life extremely heavy going in the international arena. China's weight in international affairs has increased exponentially, in step with its growing economy. Previous policy decisions to lie low are becoming increasingly untenable, not to mention hypocritical in the eyes of the international community. The need for a policy rethink spurred Hu's 'harmonious society/world' idea. China now needs to adjust its attitude; a more proactive role is now necessary if the country is to shape its own destiny, both internally and externally.
- 1.6 'Scientific development' (*kexue fazhanguan*) and 'harmonious society' serves to provide Hu's domestic audience with new developmental objectives; 'harmonious world' sends the signal that China is now moving into a new stage of development. This new mentality and approach—China finally 'going out'—is applicable to both China's domestic and foreign policies, three decades into its 'open door' policy.
- 1.7 Due to China's increasingly diversified social and political lives, the idea of 'harmonious society/world' has been relatively more contested than its predecessors. Forces from the 'left' and 'right' have jumped in to offer interpretations of the idea. This is hampering efforts to achieve the desired uniformity in policy discourse within China. Given the importance of unified policy discourses to China's Leninist structure of governance, the efficacy of 'harmonious society/world' as a policy idea remains uncertain as Hu proceeds into his second term in office this autumn.

### **Policy Discourses under Deng and Jiang (1978-2002)**

- 2.1 When Deng came to power in 1978, he immediately took action to reverse Mao Zedong's revolutionary path in order to guide China in a new capitalist direction—an idea that came to be known as the 'reform and open door policy'. As the name suggests, Deng's intentions were to open up the erstwhile closed doors of China to introduce foreign participation into China's economic development. Driven by sheer economic pragmatism, slogans like 'black cat or white cat, it is a good cat if it

catches the mouse', and 'to get rich is glorious' (*zhifu guangrong*) had taken root in Chinese society and policy circles by the early 1980s.

- 2.2 Deng's objectives were clearly domestically-oriented. When mapping out China's foreign policy in the 1980s and early 1990s, he bore no illusions about China's position as a minor player in international affairs. In the earlier 1980s, he forwarded the 'peace and development' (*heping yu fazhan*) theory, arguing that the challenges China faced were 'matters of North-South divide', rather than East-West differences. China faced no threat of war, but was threatened by its own lack of (economic) development.<sup>1</sup>
- 2.3 Then, the fallout from the Tiananmen crackdown, the end of the Cold War, and a new surge in China's economic development in the early 1990s created new challenges for the Chinese leadership. '*Taoguang yanghui yousuo zuowei*' ('hiding one's capacity while biding one's time') and '*budangtou*' sent a strong message to Chinese policymakers to steer away from the pitfalls of becoming a imaginary foe of post-Cold War international politics; maintaining a low profile was deemed a better option given China's hostile reception in international society.
- 2.4 Deng's mission was simple: to involve foreign (particularly Western) interests in China's economic development and to enrich the nation; China's proactive involvement in international affairs could come at a later stage.
- 2.5 Along with improving relations with the international community in the mid-1990s, foreign policy directives changed yet again under Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin. China's stalled reforms had been reinvigorated, and two decades of continuous economic growth had made the country a fast-rising economic power. During those years, China's GDP had grown more than sixteenfold. A rethink of China's international policy was urgently sought.
- 2.6 Jiang thus floated the idea of China 'gearing with the world', and 'developing China into a comprehensive power'. These thoughts marked an era of China's growing confidence in its domestic developments. China was not as inward-looking as in earlier years and was gradually

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<sup>1</sup> '*Taoguang Yanghui Yousuo Zuowei*—Interpretation of Deng Xiaoping's Foreign Policy Thinking', *Guangming Daily*, 09 August 2004.

recognising its need to ride the wave of globalisation. Neoliberal ideas mushroomed under Jiang, as China barged ahead with its economic activities.

- 2.7 Meanwhile, China was increasingly embedding itself in the network of international relations. Beijing had stepped up its involvement in international institutions and organisations, to the extent that China had become a signatory member of almost all major international regimes by the late 1990s, rounding off this massive effort with a celebrated move to join the World Trade Organisation in 2001.
- 2.8 Beijing has since shown its willingness to participate in international affairs. Having first participated in United Nations peacekeeping operations in 1990, China's international peacekeeping engagements today involve some 698 service personnel across 15 overseas missions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, China has also been more proactive in shaping its international environment. Beijing was the strongest advocate behind the formation of China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) and the Shanghai-6.

### **New Realities and Challenges under Hu**

- 3.1 China's economic miracle has been the envy of the Third World. When Hu took over from Jiang in 2002, China became the world's sixth largest economy. The economy was still going strong after two decades of continuous growth, as GDP breached the 10 trillion yuan (USD 1.2 trillion) mark for the first time.<sup>3</sup> The national deflation of the late 1990s was finally harnessed by 2002, recording a more controlled 1.2% inflation in 2003.<sup>4</sup> National confidence reached an unprecedented high.
- 3.2 However, even though the future of the Chinese economy appears rosy for the years ahead, many new challenges have surfaced along with rapid development. When he took over the helm, Hu also inherited an

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<sup>2</sup> 'China's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations', *PLA Daily*, available at <[http://english.pladaily.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2004-09/13/content\\_12891.htm](http://english.pladaily.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2004-09/13/content_12891.htm)> [Accessed 20 August 2007].

<sup>3</sup> John Wong, 'China's Economy in 2002 and Outlook for 2003', in *East Asian Institute Contemporary China Series No. 34: China's Politics and Economy in 2003* (Singapore: World Scientific and Singapore University Press, 2003), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Shujie Yao and Minjia Chen, 'Chinese Economy in 2006: a High Growth Path Towards a "Harmonious Society"', *Briefing Series - Issue 18* (Nottingham: China Policy Institute, 2007), p.5

increasingly disparate society: widening regional disparities, a tattered social and welfare system, massive unemployment, structural poverty, and rising environmental concerns. On the foreign policy front, China was besieged with new externalities, from international terrorism and separatist movements to strategic containment, and massive trade imbalances to those speculative 'hot' monies that flow across international frontiers.

- 3.3 The rapid pace of development has disrupted the formation of the pluralistic yet cohesive society that Beijing had hoped for; instead, a highly divided society has emerged. Interests exploded across different strata of society. Hu's pro-people approach has raised the expectations of ordinary Chinese citizens. With the addition of a freer press and more tolerant atmosphere, the people are more willing to mobilize and voice their grievances.<sup>5</sup>
- 3.4 When Hu came into power, the CCP's legitimacy to rule was in balance. Mounting social and political problems called into question the CCP's governing capacity, while uncontrolled and widespread corruption and misconduct by cadres and government officials further tarnished the party's image.
- 3.5 Hu was thus compelled to look into issues beyond economic development, in contrast to his predecessors of the past. 'Harmonious society' (as well as its earlier form, 'scientific development') as a policy idea came in as a means to delineate the direction of the new leadership. China (and Hu) now needs to ditch its erstwhile infatuation with economic growth to pursue a more *sustainable* mode of development.
- 3.6 The new developmental discourse serves to fulfil three purposes. First, it offers an ideational platform that articulates Hu's policy vision. Second, 'harmonious society' is a 'mainstream' discourse that effectively stems from alternative policy discourse (e.g. neoliberal development discourse under Jiang); this helps to put the huge Chinese bureaucratic machinery in step with the new leadership and mobilise support for Hu's reign. Third, it

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<sup>5</sup> Social unrest has become prevalent in China in recent years. It has also become larger in scale, and increasingly violent. According to China's Ministry of Public Security statistics, in 2005, there were 87,000 'mass incidents' (public protests) in China, up 6.6% from 2004. 'China to "Strike Hard" Against Rising Unrest', *Reuters*, 26 January 2006.



is part of an ongoing legacy-building process, both for Hu as well as for the CCP.

### **'Going Out': Hu's International Vision for China**

- 4.1 Meanwhile, 'building a harmonious society' became 'building a harmonious world' on China's foreign policy front. This came at a time when the Chinese leadership's interest in 'peaceful rise/development' ideas fizzled out after it failed to make its mark in international discourse.
- 4.2 Yet China's circumstances remain unchanged. It still needs a peaceful international environment for domestic development. After all that has been said about refocusing on sustainability, furthering China's economic wellbeing remains *the* highest national and political priority.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, this would not be possible without the benign international environment that has underpinned China's economic success in recent decades.
- 4.3 Beijing thus needs to find another expression for its international policy. In this case, 'harmonious world' appears to be an appropriate departure from the previous 'peaceful rise/development' rhetoric. Combining previous arguments on 'peaceful rise/development' with those of 'harmonious society', Beijing is trying to synchronize its internal and external outlooks, so that its international behaviours are no more than extensions of its self-belief and domestic policies.<sup>7</sup>
- 4.4 At its core, however, 'harmonious society' carries a deeper message. If '*taoguang yanghui*' means China inviting the outside world to participate in its development, and 'gearing with the world' is interpreted as a developing China bringing itself on a par with the rest of the world, then 'harmonious world' suggests an increasingly confident China relinquishing its aloofness to participate and undertake greater responsibilities in international affairs.

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<sup>6</sup> The Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Meeting in August 2006 passed directives clearly stating that 'economic development should remain the central theme of (China's) foreign policy'. Later, Premier Wen Jiabao also argued that China continued to be in the primary stages of socialism, despite rapid economic development over the last few decades, and urged the CCP to persevere in its task to realise greater 'liberalization and development of productive forces'. See 'Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Meeting Held in Beijing; Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao Made Keynote Speeches', *People's Daily*, 24 August 2006; 'Wen Jiabao: A Few Issues Concerning Our Historic Role in the Early Stages of Socialism and China's External Relations', *Xinhua News*, 26 February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *People's Daily*, op. cit.

- 4.5 For the moment, this new urge to reach out—China ‘going out’ (*zou chuqu*)—appears to be confined to the economic and cultural spheres. Meanwhile, Beijing has opted for a more cautious approach to putting itself into the limelight by working within the current international framework through its membership in the UN and regional cooperative initiatives.
- 4.6 With growing foreign reserves, and the improving competitiveness of Chinese firms and brands, Beijing can now move on from simply ‘gearing with the world’ to extend Chinese economic influence overseas. Primarily, this has taken the form of encouraging Chinese firms to invest, set up operations, or list in foreign markets.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, China has offered foreign aid and soft loans to third world countries, in particular to the cash-strapped, but resource-rich, South American and African states.
- 4.7 In the past two years, China ‘going out’ has appeared to take on a new form, as Beijing begins to actively promote Chinese culture under the ‘harmonious world’ banner. Policy-wise, this manifested itself in the establishment of over 150 Confucius Institutes in institutes of higher learning across the world, with seed funding and material help from the Office of Chinese Language Council International. The main function of these institutes is to improve the understanding of Chinese culture through improved language training facilities and immersion in the teachings of Confucius—thus greater ‘mutual understanding’, as articulated in the idea of ‘harmonious world’.

### **Contestations of ‘Harmonious Society/World’**

- 5.1 As a signature of Hu’s policy drive, ‘harmonious society/world’ has become a vehicle of political power in China. Policymakers, party cadres and intellectual groups of various political persuasions have been actively involved in the debate over its interpretation. Often, contributors to the debate seeking to draw attention to their own agenda turn opportunistic in their approaches to and interpretations of ‘harmonious society/world’.

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<sup>8</sup> According to *Xinhua* reports, China’s accumulated foreign direct investments (FDI) reached USD 73 billion at the end of 2006 to become the world’s 13th largest source of FDI. China’s outward FDI continues to grow at a phenomenal rate, averaging 60% annually. ‘China Progressing Rapidly in the Ranks of Top Investing Countries’, *Xinhua CEIS*, 26 July 2007.

- 5.2 In general, two large camps can be identified. To the left of China's political spectrum, old leftists like Gong Xiantian (Professor of Economics at Beijing University) and some retired government officials represent the interests of the traditional working class and the peasantry. A batch of younger left-leaning intellectuals, mainly active scholars from elite institutions, for example Cui Zhiyuan (Qinghua University), Wang Hui (Qinghua University), and Wang Shaoguang (Chinese University of Hong Kong), are more inclined to favour the interests of 'new' and marginalised social groups. Commonly labelled the 'New Left', this group is more concerned with issues such as income redistribution, sustainable development, educational reforms, and improving China's social welfare system. The objective of the 'old' and 'new' lefts, however, is common: despite their strong support for the 'harmonious society' idea, individuals in this camp tend to be very critical of the many 'harmonious world' policies with undertones of globalisation.
- 5.3 On the right, another camp holding the fort is also trying to work the idea of 'harmony' into their agenda. In essence, these individuals are more supportive of 'harmonious world' than 'harmonious society' due to their rightist, pro-globalization outlook. Notable figures include Yu Keping (Vice-Chief of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau), Zhou Ruijin (former Editor-in-Chief of *People's Daily*), Liu Ji (former Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), and Xie Tao (former Vice President of the People's University of China), renowned liberals who enjoy strong ties with China's developed regions—hence their close association with China's newly emerged entrepreneurial class and expanding urban population. These intellectuals favour a strong state that is founded on the ideology of democratic socialism, and strongly propound the acceleration of political and democratic reforms, greater social participation and government innovation. For this group, the message is clear: a 'harmonious society' can only be achieved through political reforms and the democratization of the CCP system.
- 5.4 The two camps have constantly pitted themselves against each other over various state policies. The liberals held the upper hand during Jiang Zemin's era, but Hu's 'pro-people' turnaround was deemed a change of fates between the two camps. Their fortunes seemingly switched again recently, when the National People's Congress passed the highly controversial Property Rights Bill in March 2007. The bill, which has

undergone numerous drafts and revisions, and eight readings in the plenums of the NPC over 13 years, was passed amid fierce opposition from the left.<sup>9</sup> The rationale of the bill's passage? To realise the 'building (of) a harmonious society' through further capitalistic development.<sup>10</sup>

- 5.5 There are also others who fall in between these two camps, though these individuals are known to sway incessantly in order to secure the political high ground in various debates. These individuals capture the imagination of those social classes whose perceived interests are not covered by the two major camps. But given their relatively fluid positions, and the lack of cohesiveness and clear agenda of this third group, their voices are often overwhelmed in the already-crowded discourse.
- 5.6 This 'balance' of opinions is making life extremely difficult for China's top leaders. Hu's continuous quest to legitimise his reign requires him to pay close attention to popular sentiments. Due to the lack of institutional means to convert his popularity (e.g. through popular election) into political support, Hu is extremely vulnerable to the changing winds of the 'harmonious society' debate. Hu cannot be expected to align wholeheartedly with the left: he cannot possibly wind back the clock in terms of China's economic development and liberalisation; neither can he entrench himself in the rightist camp, for fear that those political and democratic reforms measures propounded by the liberals will further erode the legitimacy of the Party.
- 5.7 As different intellectual and policy groups scuffle over the interpretation of 'harmony', political competition in China, which is largely non-institutionalised beyond the Party, is bound to intensify over time. Hu may have unwittingly made himself a hostage to his own policy idea. Constant policy readjustments, performed in the name of achieving 'harmony'—as in the case of the Property Rights Bill mentioned in the last section—are thus expected as Hu is continuously tugged between the left and the right.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Seven Hundred Petitioned to Hu Jintao: Property Rights Bill's Infringements on Chinese Constitution Should be Corrected', *Lianhe Zaobao*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>10</sup> 'Hu Jintao: Full Implementation of the Private Property Rights Bill to Realise the Building of a Socialist, Rule-of-law State', *Xinhua News*, 26 March 2007.