

China Can't Have It Both Ways, but Neither Should the U.S.

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Critics of China, primarily in the U.S. have [begun to argue that China cannot be a both an economic superpower and a developing country](#). This reflects a concern that China is trying to have it both ways in global politics. On the one hand, China has tremendous influence on the global economy as it is now the second largest economy in the world and hold huge amounts of western, largely American, debt, giving China the ability to have a big impact on the global economy. Similarly, China's military is, while not comparable in cost or power to that of the U.S., is one of the largest and most powerful in the world.

China, for its part, continues to argue that [due to its enormous population, number of people living in poverty and low per capita income, it is still a developing country](#). This is far more than just an academic debate because how China is defined frames its global role and responsibilities. If it is truly a superpower, China, according to the U.S., should step up its contributions to maintaining or creating a functioning global economy, open up its trade and monetary policy and act on other responsibilities appropriate to a country of its stature. China argues that as a developing economy, its primary responsibilities are to continue to pull its people out of poverty and to protect its still growing and not fully developed economy, but not to contribute financially or otherwise to helping solve a range of global concerns.

If China can act as a superpower while being treated like a developing country, they will have successfully manipulated international politics to a tremendous advantage. Given the likelihood of increased competition between China and the U.S., this naturally raises rancor in Washington where there is a feeling that China should have the same responsibilities and be treated the same as other wealthy developed countries.

American irritation at China trying to have it both ways is certainly reasonable but it is also somewhat hollow, or even hypocritical. When the American diplomats and politicians refer to international laws, norms of behavior of the like, they are really referring to laws and norms which were created by the U.S. and its allies. As the world's most powerful country for much of the last sixty years, and the world's only superpower for roughly a third of that time, it should be no surprise that the U.S. has played a major role in crafting and forming these laws and norms. However, if another country, other than for example traditional allies with whom the U.S. crafted these laws, is asked to accept the responsibility of being a superpower, than that country probably should have a right to help further develop these norms. The U.S. is asking China to play by the rules it, the U.S., has created as part of the cost of being a superpower. It is no wonder that this is not well received in Beijing. The U.S. is thus also trying to have it both ways as well by

asking China to step up and meet its new responsibilities as a rising power, but seeking to make sure that those responsibilities remain defined by the U.S. and its allies.

Concerns about U.S. declining power and the possibility of being replaced by China as the world's preeminent power are part of this discussion. It would be an enormous victory for the U.S. if the global structures and norms put in place during its run as superpower stayed in place after the U.S. became, at best, one of many roughly equal powers, but clearly this is not something with which China would be comfortable. Both countries occupy a complex place in the global power hierarchy. China is an economic powerhouse which still has hundreds of millions of people living in poverty. The U.S. is a declining power which, while still the most powerful country in the world, is going to have to share power if it expects other countries to share costs. Resolving these conflicts will be an important part of the foundation of future U.S.-China relations.