

Introduction

Dynamism and contention: understanding Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping

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Chinese foreign policy under the presidency of Xi Jinping has been at once dynamic and contentious. Its dynamic character can be seen first in its new and self-assured multidimensional activism in the regional and global political economy. The successful launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) among the BRICS states; the articulation of what is arguably a global vision with Chinese characteristics, given form in the ambitious project of constructing ‘one belt, one road’ (OBOR); the active promotion of the concept of a new type of Great Power relations with the United States; and the prominently announced strategy of constructing a community of common destiny through its regional diplomacy—all these can be counted among China’s ‘major diplomatic initiatives’ and ‘innovations in diplomatic theory and practice’ in the dawning Xi Jinping era.¹ China has also taken up ‘a more globalist stance’ at the United Nations.² Increased activism in Chinese foreign policy is further witnessed by the global footprint of Xi’s summit meetings with world leaders at various global forums ranging from Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the BRICS and the G20 to the world climate change conference in Paris in December 2015 and the nuclear security summit in Washington in April 2016.

There have been significant domestic institutional changes to note, too. In the words of China’s top diplomat, State Councillor Yang Jiechi, ‘since the 18th National Party Congress in November 2012, the new leadership has made a range of new initiatives to streamline China’s foreign policy-making and implementation system to ensure a “holistic approach” to the management of diplomatic affairs’.³ Although this ‘holistic approach’ still remains largely opaque, one visible significant institutional change has been the establishment in November 2013 of the long-heralded National Security Commission, chaired by Xi Jinping. Also notable is the first ever CCP Central Work Conference on China’s Neighbourhood Diplomacy, which was convened in November 2013—followed closely by the CCP Central Work Conference on Foreign Affairs in November 2014. Both conferences articulated

¹ Yang Jiechi, ‘Implementing the Chinese dream’, *National Interest*, 10 Sept. 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/implementing-the-chinese-dream-9026>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 26 May 2016.)

² Rosemary Foot, “‘Doing some things’ in the Xi Jinping era: the United Nations as China’s venue of choice”, *International Affairs* 90: 5, Sept. 2014, pp. 1085–1100.

³ Yang, ‘Implementing the Chinese dream’.

a strategically ambitious foreign policy agenda with the aim of actively shaping China's international environment, supported by the effective application of rising Chinese power. At the 2014 work conference, Xi emphasized specifically that Chinese diplomacy should be conducted 'with a salient Chinese feature and a Chinese vision' in defending China's core national interests, while developing 'a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major country'.⁴ All this signalled a decisive and sustained departure from Deng Xiaoping's cardinal foreign policy principle of 'hiding one's capacity and keeping a low profile' (*taoguang yanghui*) and an unmistakable move towards 'striving for achievement' (*fenfa youwei*).⁵

The contentious nature of Chinese foreign policy is readily epitomized in China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013. More generally, China's increasingly uncompromising, and sometimes aggressive, policies in dealing with the simmering territorial disputes and hardening maritime claims in the South China Sea have significantly heightened regional tensions and unease, an outcome that runs counter to China's own declared 'good-neighbour' diplomacy. These policies are also largely responsible for producing 'the new assertive China meme' in the United States.⁶ More specifically, unprecedented large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea conducted by China from late 2013 onwards has arguably changed the status quo in these waters. Military assets that China has allegedly put on some of these man-made islands threaten to escalate regional territorial and maritime disputes into geostrategic rivalry between China and the United States, as the latter asserts the freedom of navigation as a fundamental principle of international law by sailing its naval ships close to disputed reefs claimed and occupied by China.⁷ At a critical time of deepening strategic distrust between China and the United States, such action makes the South China Sea not just the most contested maritime space in the world, but arguably also a flashpoint with potentially disastrous global consequences.

Contention also surrounds assessment of what such changing Chinese behaviour tells us about the foreign policy goals of the rising power. Is this the end of China's peaceful rise?⁸ Or is it simply 'China's Peaceful Rise 2.0'?⁹ Is it true that

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs was held in Beijing', 29 Nov. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215680.shtml; Michael Swaine, 'Xi Jinping's address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: assessing and advancing major-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics', *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46, 19 March 2015, <http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/clm46ms.pdf>.

⁵ Yan Xuetong, 'From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7: 2, 2014, pp. 153–84; Camilla T. N. Sørensen, 'The significance of Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" for Chinese foreign policy: from "tao guang yang hui" to "fen fa you wei"', *Journal of China and International Relations* 3: 1, 2015, pp. 53–73.

⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How new and assertive is China's new assertiveness?', *International Security* 37: 4, 2013, pp. 7–48.

⁷ Michael Martina, Greg Torode and Ben Blanchard, 'China scrambles fighters as US sails warship near Chinese-claimed reef', Reuters, 11 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa-china-idUSKC-NOY10DM>.

⁸ Richard Javad Heydarian, 'The end of China's peaceful rise?', *The World Post*, 30 Dec. 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-javad-heydarian/the-end-of-chinas-peaceful_b_8893222.html.

⁹ Jian Zhang, 'China's new foreign policy under Xi Jinping: towards 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 27: 1, 2015, pp. 5–19.

'Xi aspires to increase China's power and influence (both soft and hard) and even, in the long term, to give it a dominant role in Asia and the Western Pacific—at the cost of the US ascendancy' by implementing a strategic approach of 'pushing towards the bottom-line without breaking it'?¹⁰ And in what sense has Xi 'ushered in a new era of Chinese regional and global diplomacy, one that will push the West to evaluate its overall approach to the People's Republic of China'?¹¹ These are among the probing questions currently being debated. Less contentious and more consensual is the proposition that, given China's position today as a Great Power second among equals, understanding its proactive, and sometimes also provocative, foreign policy under Xi Jinping is an endeavour of great importance, with significant implications for the future regional and global order.

Ten articles in this special issue engage in and endeavour to enrich these debates. Collectively, they grapple with the puzzles related to China's contentious foreign policy and the changing purpose of Chinese power from a diverse range of contending, and in some cases complementary, perspectives. Four contributing articles from eminent Chinese scholars closely engaged with policy analysis in China offer valuable insights and provide distinctive Chinese perspectives from the inside out on continuity and change in Chinese foreign policy, with an analytical focus on China's new neighbourhood diplomacy. The general picture that emerges from these articles is one of a rising China that is struggling to cope with a complex set of foreign policy challenges along its periphery and to exercise its agency to shape the regional order as it returns as a Great Power to the centre of the regional international system. Zhang Yunling looks at the debate over, and rationale of, making China's neighbourhood diplomacy a strategic priority in Chinese foreign policy.¹² Wu Xinbo reflects upon the intriguing combination of competitive and cooperative aspects of Sino-US interactions along China's periphery, driven by each country's assessment of how its national interests coincide with and/or conflict with those of the other.¹³ Zhao Huasheng considers China's limited strategic and security goals in its developing relationship with post-conflict Afghanistan.¹⁴ And Zhou Fangyin assesses China's delicate and sophisticated attempts at defending its sovereign and maritime rights in the South China Sea without compromising regional stability.¹⁵

Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin's article complements these inside-out perspectives well by providing a critical analysis of a particular internal discourse, namely that of a new model of Great Power relations and the associated debates, and thereby highlighting the importance of studying domestic debates in China,

¹⁰ Shi Yinhong, 'China's complicated foreign policy' (Berlin and London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 31 March 2015), http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_chinas_complicated_foreign_policy311562.

¹¹ Robert D. Blackwill and Kurt M. Campbell, *Xi Jinping on the global stage: Chinese foreign policy under a powerful but exposed leader*, Council Special Report no. 74 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Feb. 2016), p. 5.

¹² Zhang Yunling, 'China and its neighbourhood: transformation, challenges and grand strategy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 835–48 below.

¹³ Wu Xinbo, 'Cooperation, competition and shaping the outlook: the United States and China's neighbourhood diplomacy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 849–67 below.

¹⁴ Zhao Huasheng, 'Afghanistan and China's new neighbourhood diplomacy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 891–908 below.

¹⁵ Zhou Fangyin, 'Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China's South China Sea policy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 869–90 below.

which are likely to shape how the country behaves as a Great Power in the future.¹⁶ Katherine Morton's article situates China's contentions in the South China Sea in a broader analytical framework of the search for a rule-based maritime order.¹⁷ While arguing that China's political calculus and maritime strategy are increasingly informed by legitimacy concerns, she cautions that integrating China more deeply into the evolving maritime order on the basis of collective responsibility remains a defining diplomatic and strategic challenge of the contemporary era for the region. Nien-chung Chang Liao's article attempts to explain what drives China's more assertive foreign policy behaviour through a levels of analysis approach.¹⁸ Without explicitly arguing that China's assertive foreign policy bears Xi Jinping's imprimatur, it nevertheless comes to the conclusion that 'China's more assertive foreign policy since 2009 can mainly be attributed to elite perceptions and leader's preferences'. Peter Ferdinand's article casts a critical eye on the China dream and its link with Chinese foreign policy through OBOR as an evolving idea and foreign policy strategy.¹⁹ It argues that Chinese foreign policy is undergoing a major change, clearly directed by Xi Jinping, from risk-averse to risk-embracing, a shift which makes China particularly vulnerable in the foreign policy sphere.

Finally, the global dimension of Chinese foreign policy is studied by Richard Maher and Yongjin Zhang in broader perspectives. Maher's article assesses the elusive nature of the EU–China strategic partnership against an understanding of enduring divisions between the two parties over political values, geopolitical interests and conceptions of world order. It comes to a sobering conclusion that the current relationship between the EU and China is a limited rather than a strategic partnership, in which cooperation and discord are delicately and perpetually balanced.²⁰ Zhang's article investigates the complex dynamics of China's entanglement with three hierarchical constructs in the liberal global order.²¹ It argues that China has developed three differentiated strategic approaches to negotiating for normative change in global international society, namely, to defend liberal pluralism in the legalized hegemony; to contest liberal cosmopolitan anti-pluralism in the changing normative order; and to endorse state-centric solidarism with regard to the construction of a liberal global governance order.

These articles are conceived of as contributions to a continued conversation, and debate, about how to understand the dynamic and contentious foreign policy of China under Xi Jinping. As the international community has developed increasingly significant stakes in China's peaceful rise, the importance of anticipating the foreign policy trajectory of this once and future superpower cannot be overemphasized.

¹⁶ Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, 'China's "new type of Great Power relations": a G2 with Chinese characteristics?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 773–94 below.

¹⁷ Katherine Morton, 'China's ambition in the South China Sea: is a legitimate maritime order possible?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 909–940 below.

¹⁸ Nien-chung Chang Liao, 'The sources of China's assertiveness: the system, domestic politics or leadership preferences?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 817–34 below.

¹⁹ Peter Ferdinand, 'Westward ho—the China dream and 'one belt, one road': Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 941–58 below.

²⁰ Richard Maher, 'The elusive EU–China strategic partnership', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 959–76 below.

²¹ Yongjin Zhang, 'China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 795–816 below.

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