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Engaging an Emerging Superpower: Understanding China as a Foreign Policy Actor

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SUMMARY

- China should not be seen as a threat intent on deposing the United States as the world's No.1 superpower or as a dormant, peaceful status quo power with no ambitions. Such views hamper the efforts of outsiders to engage Beijing.
- It is difficult to gauge a uniform, coherent Chinese foreign policy not only because of the opacity of the state, but also because of the multitude of actors influencing and shaping policy. To engage the Chinese, foreign partners need to have an understanding of this pluralism.
- Historical factors continue to be strong drivers of Chinese foreign policy in Asia. China's leading position in the region is unequivocal, and it has shown a growing confidence in flexing its muscles. Key Chinese priorities in Asia are keeping American power from expanding and securing economic and security needs. To these ends, bilateral and informal ties are favoured over multilateral ones.
- Outside Asia, China is not as shy as before in asserting itself. This has increased after the global economic crisis, which significantly underlined a shift of power from the West to Asia. While internal stability and security remain a top priority, in recent years, Beijing has shown that it is ready to take a more assertive international stance and stand up for itself to protect its interests.
- An understanding of and sensitivity about the roles nationalism and history continue to play in Chinese foreign policy, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, are crucial. Strengthening business ties with Beijing will no doubt advance bilateral relations, but gaining an understanding of China's preferred strategies in foreign partnerships – namely soft diplomacy and non-confrontational persuasion – will help those relations go further.

INTRODUCTION

China's economic surge has so far not been accompanied by Western-style democratic reform. Indeed, in early 2011 the government in Beijing tightened its grip on power in the wake of turmoil in the Middle East and fears that similar uprisings could happen in China. But even though the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appears unchallenged, China's foreign policy is shaped and influenced by a host of decision-makers – some with competing interests – making it difficult for outside observers to conclude with certainty whether China is driving towards either a status quo policy or an expansionist one. It is not yet possible to formulate a uniform, coherent Chinese foreign policy agenda that represents 'the Chinese view'.

China's foreign policy strategies also vary depending on where one looks. In Asia, it is the dominant power, driven by its desire to retain that position and balance American influence in the region. Asia is where many key Chinese security, economic and strategic interests are at stake, and Beijing is assertive in protecting them. Outside the region, China's position is much more ambivalent. The global economic crisis has reinforced its envied position as the world's fastest-growing economy and challenger of American power. As a result, it is now much more difficult for China's leaders to sustain their rhetoric that China is still merely a developing country focusing on its own domestic issues. While internal stability and security remain a top priority, Beijing has certainly been more confident in its international standing relative to the United States and European powers. Yet how far it is willing or ready to take that confidence is not immediately clear.

Policy-makers and stakeholders

China's single-party rule and the complex diffusion of power between state and party mean that its politics lack the transparency of Western democracies and remain difficult to scrutinize from the outside. It is nonetheless important to note that although the CCP's top body, the Politburo Standing Committee, remains the country's decision-making hub, a number of other official and non-official entities are increasingly influencing and shaping policy.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), for example, appears to be an increasingly independent and influential entity; its actions and strategies are sometimes not totally aligned with the central government's goals, often resulting in confusing foreign policy signals. As a key political institution, the PLA is controlled by the party's Central Military Commission; but the extent to

which the central leadership coordinates with the PLA's decision-making process is not at all clear. In early 2011, the PLA tested its new stealth fighter plane just as the Sino-US military-to-military relationship resumed, striking an uncomfortably confrontational note during US Defense Secretary Robert Gates' visit. The PLA has also not shown enthusiasm for strengthening military ties with the United States – in contrast to the high spirits on both sides for President Hu Jintao's state visit to Washington in January 2011. There have been similar incidents in recent years. In January 2007 China caused international alarm and drew condemnation when it carried out a surprise anti-satellite missile test; both the apparent ignorance of the foreign ministry about the test and the unexplained delay in official reaction led to speculation that civilian leaders were not fully apprised of the military's plans.

Foreign policy-makers should be aware of the networks of relationships between various arms of the CCP, the State Council and the PLA, as well as marginal players such as an increasingly vocal body of 'netizens', academics and researchers, and businesses with large stakes overseas. All these groups have their own, often competing views on matters such as the Sino-US relationship, Japan, and how much China should cooperate within the framework of the United Nations on human rights and the sanctioning of rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran. Some researchers believe that newly influential foreign policy actors are pursuing a 'less submissive' Chinese approach, taking the view that China should more actively defend its interests internationally, although that stance still faces some resistance from conservative leaders who believe that China should avoid international leadership.¹ While foreign observers may not be able to fully penetrate the network of Chinese policy-makers, it is crucial to be aware of such pluralism and evaluate the potential interests of different groups.

Protecting regional interests

China has key energy, security and strategic interests in Asia: from claims to Taiwan, Tibet and other maritime territory in the South China Sea, to preserving North Korea as a buffer against American power in the region, and securing energy resources in Central Asia.

At the same time, its ties with many neighbours remain strongly driven by historical relations – based on both friendships and grievances. The

relationship with Japan remains fragile, and resentment against the Japanese invasion of China during the Second World War is still evident across many Chinese online forums. Meanwhile, friendly relations with some of Asia's most destabilizing regimes often combine with Beijing's national interests to clash with the kind of behaviour Western powers expect China to display as a 'responsible stakeholder'. Beijing's historical friendship with Myanmar, for example, is as strong a factor in its diplomatic shielding of the country's military junta as Chinese geopolitical interests there. China similarly defended North Korea's aggression when it apparently sank a South Korean vessel in March 2010, killing dozens. Beijing appears to be willing to take pains to retain this Cold War-era ally as a bulwark against US military dominance of the region and the rise of Japan's military. North Korea, of course, is also a key trade partner and would present a massive border-security problem should its regime collapse. All these concerns are close to the hearts of Chinese leaders, even though some in China are proposing working more closely with the United States, Japan and South Korea on strategies regarding the Korean peninsula.

As its neighbours increasingly rely on trade relations with it, China has shown growing confidence in flexing its muscles to claim territories it sees as rightfully Chinese. Its hard line against Taiwanese and Tibetan independence shows no signs of weakening, and it has also escalated its sovereign claims to contested waters in the South China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. In 2010, Beijing drew much criticism for supporting an embargo of rare earths against Japan after a Chinese fishing boat operating in Japanese waters collided with Japanese coastguard vessels. Such territorial aggression has intensified in 2011 – in June, Vietnam expressed outrage that its fishermen and oil exploration vessels were harassed and attacked by Chinese patrol vessels in disputed waters in the South China Sea.

To make matters worse, Chinese policies in the region retain a historically hierarchical structure where bilateral relations take precedence over multilateral political arenas such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For centuries the Chinese saw theirs as the 'Middle Kingdom' at the centre of the world, surrounded by humble tributary states in the region. That elitist world view is still extremely potent – especially with China's current rise after a long period of internal strife and subjection to perceived Western humiliation.

¹ Jakobson, Linda and Knox, Dean, 'New Foreign Policy Actors in China', SIPRI Policy Paper, September 2010.

Despite interacting with ASEAN and taking part in the Six Party Talks, China, like other Asian countries, cherishes state sovereignty over regional decision-making bodies with power over individual member states' internal affairs. Beijing favours the traditional, more private means of bilateral dealings with individual states, not least because these give it maximum leverage as a powerful trade partner. Regional institutions, with their emphasis on harmonious consensus, have also not proved useful in engaging China in resolving long-standing bilateral territorial disputes, which Beijing insists on resolving bilaterally. For Chinese leaders, discussing sensitive territorial arguments in a multilateral setting not only amounts to an uncomfortable 'airing dirty laundry', but could allow angered nations such as Vietnam and the Philippines to join forces, as well as opening the window for intervention by a third party such as the United States.

A global player

US President Barack Obama recently joined many other world leaders in calling for China to play a greater role on the international stage – in other words, to 'pull its weight' as a major power. At the UN Security Council and elsewhere, China's reluctance to condemn or censure pariah regimes, such as in the aftermath of North Korean provocations in the Yellow Sea in 2010, often blocks any strong international action against dangerous states.

It would be a mistake, however, to take the view that China is completely ignoring international pressure for it to cooperate on global issues or to improve human rights in the country. Beijing is not deaf to the negative press it receives abroad, but it is also loath to be talked down to and 'lose face'. Memories of more than a century of Western pillaging and bullying are still fresh, and Chinese leaders have deep-seated suspicions about Western moves to pressure it into cooperation. Such actions are often viewed as attempts to undercut its rise, a scepticism that may well be fuelled by growing China-bashing in the United States. If the Nobel committee's decision to award the Peace Prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo was intended to pressure China into acknowledging its shortcomings in human rights, the plan totally backfired. Beijing responded with a bristling tirade against Liu, the Nobel committee and much of the West, complaining about outsiders who 'cling to the Cold War or even colonial mentality'.

Chinese leaders are sensitive towards such so-called colonial attitudes, and they are increasingly confident in demonstrating that the country can stand up for itself when it feels that is called for. External factors – particularly the

global economic shift of power – are giving China more global influence than ever before. In contrast to the still flailing and indebted US and European economies, China has emerged from the global economic crisis in robust shape, while the EU and United States are both in weaker bargaining positions. Beijing continues to resist American demands to reevaluate its currency, and appears to feel under less pressure to acquiesce to demands for it to cooperate on Iran and North Korea. Within Chinese foreign policy circles, there are also different views on how much responsibility China should take on for global public goods, such as tackling climate change and nuclear proliferation. Internal development still takes priority, and it seems unlikely that Chinese leaders will easily agree to contribute ‘something for nothing’ on such wider issues.

China is also in turn reluctant to cause its allies to lose face by imposing humiliating public sanctions on them, preferring to respond in accordance with its own rules. Following pressure that built in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics against its arms transfers to Sudan and its failure to impose sanctions on the African regime for the bloodshed in the Darfur region, for example, Beijing stuck to its preferred method of non-confrontational, soft diplomacy, maintaining the importance of upholding cordial relations. More recently, China, along with fellow Security Council member Russia, abstained from a UN resolution calling for a no-fly zone over Libya.² Rather than voting against the resolution, this decision suggested a somewhat surprising shift away from China’s long-held aversion to forceful interference in other countries’ affairs. There could be various explanations for this. Since there was regional approval from the Arab League and gathering international momentum for military action, for example, China may not have wanted to be seen as standing in the way of a rare universal consensus. Yet it only went as far as giving tacit approval – with an abstention, not a vote of support – and the foreign ministry continues to advocate settlement through ‘dialogue and other diplomatic means’. Although China refrained from condemning the allies’ operation – which Russia did – it did not participate in either of the two subsequent international conferences on Libya held in Paris and London, suggesting that Beijing has little intention of pulling its full weight on international issues that require cooperation among the leading powers. Whether there will be any change in direction after the leadership reshuffle in 2012 is still far from clear.

² “Security Council approves “no-fly zone” over Libya”, 17 March 2011, UN Department of Public Information, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>.

CONCLUSION

To engage China, outsiders first need to understand that making foreign policy in China has become a more decentralized process than ever before. There are multiple nuanced views about the country's role in the world as its clout grows, and foreigners should not begin with a preset perception, whether that it is of a peaceful, status quo power or of a rising threat set on world domination.

Foreign partners should be aware of and be sensitive about powerful nationalist sentiments among the Chinese public and Beijing's deep-seated suspicions about the West's motivations. Lecturing on human rights and taking the moral high ground on Tibet gain no favours when dealing with Beijing. Chinese leaders are aware and proud of their country's ascendancy in global politics. Preaching and talking down to Chinese leaders – or worse, making them publicly 'lose face' in multilateral forums – will nurture defensiveness and resistance, not cooperation. A more constructive approach is to persistently engage Beijing through bilateral meetings and to strengthen business ties while raising tougher, contentious issues in more private settings.

Finally, to enlist China in international efforts against potentially dangerous, destabilizing states, foreigners need to acknowledge that unlike the West, Beijing's *modus operandi* is not outright public condemnation, let alone arms bans or military intervention. China prefers to settle problems and foster ties in informal bilateral relationships, and remains wary of legalistic, multilateral arenas and public punishments. The recent case of China's abstention from the UN resolution on Libya may be a signal of shift – although the exact reasons why it went along with the measure are not yet clear, and it is too early to read it as a definite new trend in Chinese views on military-humanitarian interventions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Hui is a journalist from Hong Kong, where she reported on business and political news in the city and the south China region for four years before moving to London. She has published in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *Asia Sentinel*, *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, among others. She holds a MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and a BA in English from Oxford University.