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*German Institute for International and Security Affairs
(Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik: SWP)*

*Konrad Adenauer Foundation
(Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung: KAS)*

and

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3. How Do We Assess China's Foreign and Security Policy?

Giovani B. Andromino

China's foreign and security policy is primarily a function of its domestic politics, whose polar star is the preservation of the current political-institutional setup of the Chinese Party-State. The Chinese leadership explicitly articulates this posture when referring to China's "core interests", as most recently done by State Councilor Yang Jiechi during his meeting with President Donald Trump on February 27, 2017. Such interests, hierarchically ordered, allow for a progressively less compromising negotiating stance on part of Beijing the further one moves to the top of the three-item list: 3) the continued stable development of China's economy and society; 2) national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and 1) preserving China's basic state system and national security.

While the Chinese Communist Party assumes that the stability of its political regime naturally equates with China's supreme national interest, such premise does put China on a different level vis-à-vis most global players, determining a degree of heterogeneity in the international system that appears to be deepening in conjunction with China's reemergence and the fraying of the established liberal world order. Calls for adjustments to global governance entailing new approaches to sovereignty - embracing obligations and responsibilities, as well as prerogatives and rights - face China's intrinsically idiosyncratic posture in the realm of high politics. It thus seems appropriate to assess China's foreign and security policy looking at two internal dynamics shaping Beijing's behaviour on the global stage: the role of the leader and the evolving national identity underpinning China's worldview.

Xi Jinping as a "primus inter inferiores"

The salience of a national leader's input in foreign policy definition and implementation is generally hard to assess, except in retrospect, and becomes especially impervious to analysis when decision-making processes are as opaque as they are in China. Also, a leader's impact is most obvious during major crises, which have not really taken place during Xi Jinping's first term in office (2012-2017).

Xi Jinping's leadership, however, does seem to lend itself to some consequential observations. For one thing, it may be argued that, despite the absence of immediate foreign policy emergencies, the current international environment in and of itself is looking increasingly worrisome from Beijing's standpoint. Marked by a disturbing level of power

diffusion (including potentially disruptive individual empowerment) and unprecedented uncertainty over the shifting posture of the US and Europe - the key anchors of the order which has allowed China to develop over the past four decades - global politics is becoming more and more complex precisely at a time when China's leadership needs to soft-land its over-invested economy into a "new normal" equilibrium.

While Beijing's assessment of the state of the world has not yet changed in its fundamental components - "international multipolarisation, the globalisation of the economy and the democratisation of international relations" remain the defining trends - clearly the medium-term tendencies being observed require a break with the prudent conduct of the recent past. In this context, on February 17 Xi Jinping has used his role as chairman of the State Security Commission to indicate for the first time that China should "guide" the shaping a "new world order" and "safeguard international security".

Secondly, the evolution of Xi's own political-institutional physiognomy offers insights as to the transformation of top policy-making in today's China, a dynamic that is likely to become more evident after the XIX Congress of the CCP in autumn, when the ongoing personnel reshuffle will reach its climax with the renewed membership of the Politburo and its Standing Committee, likely affording Xi even greater political leeway. The outcome of this critical transition will set the stage for the next half-decade of government action in China, which many deem to be the timeframe within which China has to either robustly reform its growth model, or face a more radical and potentially disorderly adjustment down the road. Greater cohesiveness in the "collective wisdom" of the incoming leadership and its will (and capacity) to see substantial implementation of the bold decisions outlined in the 3rd Plenary Session in November 2013 will fundamentally influence China's domestic stability and hence its propensity to walk the walk of a more "inclusive globalisation" (as opposed to - say - sliding toward populist revanchism).

Clearly, Xi's hyperbolic enhancement of his own position once appointed at the apex of political power in China confirms the remarkable institutional flexibility of the Party-State, which has been stretched to the point where the role of General Secretary of the Party and President of the People's Republic - formerly a *primus inter pares* in the Politburo Standing Committee - has morphed into a condition of *primus inter inferiores*. With the assumption of the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commissions at the very onset of his first term in office, Xi upended the previous practice, setting the stage for his unprecedented and very public proclamation as "Commander-in-chief of the CMC Joint Operations Center" in April 2016. While Xi's determination to concentrate power in his hands has clearly met a degree of resistance - as suggested by the lack of progress in the implementation of economic reforms, but also by the enduring and highly discretionary anti-corruption campaign, ubiquitous calls for unquestioning loyalty to the Party, and increasingly

paranoid measures of social control - his authority was further enhanced by the decision of the CCP Central Committee to elevate him to “core” of the fifth generation of leaders, a title that had eluded his predecessor Hu Jintao. Coupled with his heading several key Leading Small Groups of the CCP Central Committee, such development has led influential scholars to refer to him as the “Imperial President”.

Xi’s authority is anything but titular, especially in the foreign and security policy realms. Not only has he deliberately chosen to cast himself as a transformative leader (with a pervasive media presence echoing what has been described as a supremely selfconfident personality): he has actively sought ownership of all major foreign policy dossiers, including some previously handled by the PRC Premier (notably Europe and the West Asia, Northern Africa region). From a symbolic-normative perspective, Xi has quickly broken with his predecessor’s defining tifa (official discourse) by advancing his own keywords, chiefly the “China dream” of the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. It is noteworthy that the first instance of Party-State tifa gaining enough symbolic-normative traction as to shape the global discourse took place under Xi’s tenure, and precisely in the foreign policy domain: the New Silk Road project - then renamed “One Belt One Road” and finally “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) - is very much Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy proposition, and while not quite a grand strategy in itself, it surely is a test case of China’s success in breaking Western hegemony in the production of globally influential symbolic capital.

China’s evolving national identity and worldview

Besides holding the monopoly over political power, the CCP jealously preserves its role as the sole authority permitted to mould China’s official identity and worldview. Over the past five years the Party’s cultural hegemony has been markedly reinforced: in the bureaucratic sphere, veteran leader Liu Yunshan has commanded over a tightly integrated system combining orthodoxy-defining institutions (Central Party Schools), propaganda channels (traditional media at home and abroad, with a special effort made to target overseas Chinese), and tools to repress views contesting the State-sanctioned narrative.

Operationally, not even the most prestigious universities and research institutions have been spared from the forced narrowing of the spectrum of ideas that may legitimately be debated in public. Some analyses relate this tightening ideological grip to the ambitious rebalancing China needs to implement in the coming years. This line of thought, popularised in the 1980s as neo-authoritarianism, posits that the structural reforms needed to fully modernise China require a robust central authority to reduce the transaction costs of major adjustment.

However, while efficient in suppressing political participation, this approach has so far been less than successful in curbing the most immediate threat to economic reforms,

namely vested interests concentrated in the Party-State apparatus. Barring significant discontinuity after the XIX Congress, it would appear that the official identity being crafted for China as it heads for the two centennials (2021 and 2049) is one combining Leninism in the political sphere, a technological closed society mollified by sanitized confucian attributes, and semi-contendible economic and financial playing fields heavily populated by Party-controlled national corporate champions. This trajectory, advocated by members of Xi Jinping's closest entourage such as Wang Huning, has several implications for the foreign and security policy domains.

Firstly, the increasingly focal role of the Party, as remarked by Xi during the 2014 Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, lies at the heart of China's quest for its own - quintessentially Chinese - version of modernity. Far from being a purely domestic goal, this project reflects an overarching foreign policy objective: China's insistence on inclusiveness and especially "harmony" (he er butong) in world affairs effectively implies the end of the Western hegemonic prerogative to define the contours of the "international community", and the recognition that alternative social, economic and political models may coexist with equal legitimacy.

Secondly, the promotion of conformism and active discouragement of systematic engagement with foreign ideas - especially among China's youth, already pervasively socialised to the tenets of patriotic education - may in the long run restrict the spectrum of policy options fed to the leadership. While Xi Jinping has recently expressed his vision for "agglomerating talent into research institutions" and "breaking institutional boundaries" to allow for an exchange of talent between the private sector, the government, and think tanks, the benefit of "revolving doors" is easily offset when scholars are intimidated and research grants foster generalised sycophancy.

Thirdly, as greater emphasis is placed on the "Chinese characteristics" of China's socialist market economy - particularly the role of national corporate champions in spearheading global investment, market penetration, strategic assets acquisition, and productivity acceleration - a number of practical implications are likely to challenge established practices and exacerbate departmental fragmentation across the Party-State:

- a) the growing stock of China's outbound foreign direct investment is outpacing the capacity of the state and PLA to provide necessary protection and supervision to Chinese citizens, personnel and assets overseas;
- b) public opinion in key countries appears to reflect increasing diffidence towards China, especially in Europe, where Beijing's lack of reciprocity in several trade and investment domains is frustrating governments too;

- c) the investments that would give substance to the Belt and Road Initiative require long-term stability and cooperation with myriad interlocutors in very complex regions of Asia to generate returns: unlocking the potential of Eurasian connectivity is as much a political-diplomatic conundrum as it is a financial and infrastructural challenge;
- d) encouraging economic dependency on China in volatile countries where Beijing is reluctant to get too involved politically (i.e. the Middle East and North Africa) may not shield it from the public hostility of nationalist or radical movements, with potential spillover effects inside China (the restive region of Xinjiang being a case in point).



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