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Trump, China, and the Implications for Japan and East Asia

Restless Rivals

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Restless Rivals: Trump, China and the implications for Japan and East Asia

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Trump’s China Policy: Implications of an „America First“ Policy for East Asia</td>
<td>Bonnie Glaser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How do we Assess China’s Foreign and Security Policy? A Japanese View</td>
<td>Hideshi Tokuchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Korean Peninsula: Focus on Tensions.</td>
<td>Giovanni B. Andornino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>China’s Maritime Security Policy: Trends in Early 2017</td>
<td>Mathieu Duchâtel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>East Asia: Territorial Issues and Regional Security Developments: The View From Japan’s Alliance Partner, With a Focus On the Senkaku Islands Dispute</td>
<td>Robert D. Eldridge, Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Korean Peninsula: Focus on Tensions.</td>
<td>Masashi Nishihara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How Do We Assess China’s Foreign and Security Policy?

Giovani B. Andornino

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 Communist Party-State. The Chinese leadership explicitly articulates this posture when referring to China’s “core interests”, as most recently done by State Councillor 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.

3. How Do We Assess China’s Foreign and Security Policy?
compartmentalisation, spurious calls for unproductive loyalty to the Party, and incursions on economic reforms, but also by the enduring and highly discretionary anti-corruption campaign of Xi's government - a measure of the lack of progress in the implementation of the reform agenda since April 2012. While Xi's determination to concentrate power in his hands has clearly met a degree of resistance - as evidenced by the lack of progress in the implementation of the CPC Third Plenum's agenda - the Party's leaders remain firmly convinced of the need to achieve a “new normal” equilibrium.

In office, Xi has upended the previous precedent, setting the stage for an unprecedented and fundamentally new version of the Chinese leadership style. The Prime Minister of People's Republic of China - formerly a primarily behind the scenes figure in the Politburo Standing Committee and the President of the People's Republic - is now the driving force behind the direction of the Party and the country. Xi's approach reflects a new reality in which the Chinese leadership is more radical and less constrained by the need for stability. Xi's political centralisation has resulted in a shift away from the incrementalism of the past, and towards a more audacious and transformative agenda.

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 of a "new world order" and "safeguard international security." This is a significant shift from the previous approach, which was more focused on maintaining stability and avoiding confrontations.

Secondly, the evolution of Xi's political institutional framework offers insights into 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 renewal 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 will be crucial to the nation's long-term stability and progress.

Clearly, Xi's hyperbolic enhancement of his own position once appointed at the apex of the Chinese leadership confirms the remarkable institutional flexibility of the Party-State, which has been stretched to the point where the role of the General Secretary of the Party and President of the People's Republic is no longer a primus inter pares in the Politburo Standing Committee. Instead, Xi has assumed a condition of primus inter inferiores, with the assumption of the role of Commander-in-Chief of the CMC Joint Operations Centre at the very outset of his first term in office.

While Beijing's assessment of the state of the world has not yet changed in its substance, the medium-term tendencies being observed require a break with the prudent conduct of the recent past. In this context, the shift to a more robust and proactive approach is likely to become more evident after the XIX Congress of the CCP in autumn, when the stabilising effect of the Country's dynamic leadership is likely to become more evident. The new political order is more radical and potentially disorderly down the road.

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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 self-confident 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 "targets (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 "targets (official discourse) 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 is a clear 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, under the leadership of Liu Yunshan. In the bureaucratic sphere, veteran leader Liu Yunshan has commanded over a tightly integrated system combining orthodoxy-defining institutions (Central Party Schools) producing scholars promoting and defending the Party's line and orthodoxy, and propaganda channels (traditional media at home and abroad, with a special effort made to gain a strong presence in the overseas Chinese community). The Party has also tightened its grip over traditional media at home and abroad, with a special effort made to target overseas Chinese communities.

Operationally, not even the most prestigious universities and research institutions have been spared. From a symbolic-normative perspective, the tightening of the spectrum of ideas that may be debated in public has been described as a "neo-authoritarian" approach, popularised in the 1980s by scholars like Zhang Xueyong and Dong Qichang. This approach posits that the structural reforms needed to fully modernise China require a robust central authority to reduce the transaction costs of market liberalisation. While such reforms are needed to enhance China's competitiveness, they also threaten the Party's monopoly over political power. The Party has responded by tightening its grip over traditional media at home and abroad, with a special effort made to target overseas Chinese communities.
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 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 Confucianism 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 barriers” to allow for an exchange of talent between the private sector, the government, and think tanks, the benefits of “revolving doors” are 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’ persons and assets overseas;

b) public opinion in key countries appears to reflect increasing discontinuity towards China’s leadership, as Western perceptions of China’s intentions are shaped by narratives seeded in the Party-controlled media and by the policies of China’s official identity, the so-called “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

c) In 50 years of reform and development, China has made tremendous achievements in various fields, including economic, social, cultural, and military development. The achievements are recognized and admired by the international community. The Chinese government is committed to maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and the world. China is a responsible global citizen and actively participates in global governance.

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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; 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 nationalists or radical movements, with potential spillover effects inside China (the restive region of Xinjiang being a case in point).