

China since the 18th Party Congress: a One-Year Assessment

– Foreign Policy

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Since Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as General Secretary of the CCP at the 18th Party Congress last November, Beijing has made some quite significant adjustment of the nation's foreign policy that was adopted by the previous leaderships, while on the other hand, there is also continuity in China's overall foreign policy. As Beijing's foreign policy adjustment is far from complete yet, it will be subject to further adjustment. Despite that, however, some key elements of the new orientation as well as continuity of Beijing's foreign policy can still be clearly discerned from its rhetoric as well as its actual policy measures and initiatives on a number of bilateral, regional and global issues over the past year.

1. Beijing's Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: New Orientation and Continuity

A preliminary assessment of Xi Jinping's foreign policy since he took office last fall shows that there has been significant adjustment as well as fundamental continuity in Beijing's foreign policy over the past year. On the one hand, Beijing's foreign policy adjustment under Xi Jinping is quite visible and significant with a very clear new orientation in some most important foreign policy areas, but on the other hand, continuity in China's overall foreign policy is also quite evident. Both the adjustment and continuity of Chinese foreign policy over the past year reflects the major thinking of the new Chinese leadership in

how to effectively pursue the nation's objectives in China's relations with the outside world under the changed conditions at both the domestic and external settings.

China's relations with the United States continues to be Beijing's most important concern in its external relations and remains top on the nation's foreign policy agenda under Xi Jinping. This is not only because the United States is China's most important economic partner, but more importantly because the United States remains the most important hurdle for China to achieve its major foreign policy objectives. It is no exaggeration to say that Beijing's utmost consideration in designing its foreign policy is, in pursuing the nation's foreign policy objectives, how to overcome the constraints imposed by the United States as the only superpower in the world today. Otherwise, China's foreign policy would be much less complicated. But on the other hand, however, with its growing economic and military power over the past decade, Beijing has been gradually improving its relative position in dealing with Washington, which paves way for Beijing to start to take some active initiatives in its relations with Washington following Xi's taking office.

It is within this context that Xi Jinping took an important move by officially presenting to U.S. President Obama the concept of "a new pattern of great-power relations" between China and the United States during their first summit meeting at Sunnylands in California in early June 2013.¹ Since then, the idea of "a new pattern of great-power relations" has been repeatedly picked up by Chinese officials and state media. By proposing a new pattern of great-power relations, Beijing obviously wants to avoid "an old pattern of great power relations" in which a rising power ends up with challenging the existing power, which leads to perpetual conflict and war.² So Beijing's hope to establish a new pattern of great-power relations with Washington implies that the Chinese leadership by no means wants to challenge the U.S. superpower status in the world as well as in the Asia-Pacific region. Instead, Beijing primarily hopes to define, regulate and stabilize its relations with

Washington and have Washington respect its core interests in the Asia-Pacific region through establishing such a new pattern of great-power relations.³ In pushing Washington for mutual respect of each other's interests in the Asia-Pacific, Beijing is also echoing then-U.S.

Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's comments that the Asia-Pacific is big enough to hold both the United States and China.⁴

The second important area of adjustment and continuity in Chinese foreign policy is related to the guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy over the past three decades, namely, *tao guang yang hui* (韬光养晦), which refers to keeping a low profile in international affairs, a principle that was first introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. After initiating economic reforms in the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping discarded Mao's utopian ideas and communist ideology as sources of Chinese foreign policy and began to adopt pragmatic measures to pursue more practical objectives in foreign policy. Particularly, Deng Xiaoping started to adopt a foreign policy in the 1980s that would focus China on economic development while keeping a low profile in international affairs, which Deng Xiaoping described as *tao guang yang hui*. Deng Xiaoping adopted this low profile foreign policy in the context that China was just starting the process of modernization through economic reforms and it would be a long way to go before China could be powerful enough to be more active in international affairs. The *tao guang yang hui* foreign policy would therefore help China acquire a much needed peaceful external environment so that the country could concentrate on economic development and achieve the national objective of building a strong nation. As such, Beijing adopted a good-neighbor policy in the region and gradually reached rapprochement with former enemies in the region and normalized relations with a number of its neighboring countries like South Korea and many of Southeast Asian states. Even at the time when its territorial interests were seen as being infringed upon by some of its neighboring states, Beijing still refrained from any tough response and instead reiterated a policy of shelving

disputes and pursuing joint exploration of the disputed areas. Consequently, Deng Xiaoping's *tao guang yang hui* foreign policy helped the nation integrate with the regional and global economy as well as helped create a secure and stable regional and global environment for China's economic development. Beijing's major foreign policies from the 1980s through the 2000s can all be well explained by Deng Xiaoping's *tao guang yang hui*.

After coming to office, however, Xi Jinping has partially adjusted Deng Xiaoping's *tao guang yang hui* foreign policy, primarily relating to China's territorial disputes with Japan over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and with some Southeast Asian states over South China Sea. In contrast to its past practice of refraining from taking any assertive response to such territorial disputes, Beijing under Xi Jinping's leadership has started to show its determination to defend what it deems as its territorial integrity when its territorial interests are openly and directly encroached upon. So when Tokyo moved to nationalize Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2012, Beijing responded immediately tit for tat by sending Chinese maritime law enforcement ships into the waters of the islands for surveillance, a practice that thereafter became routine, which was later even followed by air surveillance. Beijing's reactions, although directly triggered by Tokyo's nationalization of the islands, clearly indicates that China would no longer follow *tao guang yang hui* on disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands when what Beijing sees as the bottom line of the issue is crossed. This is also the case with China's territorial disputes with the Philippines over South China Sea islands. This new orientation of Xi Jinping's foreign policy is also illustrated in his frequent talks and visits to PLA units after taking office, which have made it clear to the outside world that China would not compromise on the issues relating to China's state sovereignty and territorial integrity and that the PLA should be well prepared for defense of the country's core national interests with a guaranteed victory.

Despite its more assertive reactions to the territorial disputes with a couple of neighboring states, however, Beijing under Xi Jinping's leadership is still basically following Deng Xiaoping's *tao guang yang hui* principle in many other important foreign policy areas, emphasizing peaceful development (in place of "peaceful rise"), reiterating cooperation and joint prosperity with neighboring states, and avoiding taking a leading role in international affairs and interfering in domestic affairs of other countries. In his address to the Indonesian parliament on October 2, 2013, Xi Jinping further proposed a new concept of "comprehensive security, common security and cooperative security" and called for jointly upholding regional peace and stability.⁵

There has also been continuity and adjustment of Beijing's North Korea policy. While China remains North Korea's only ally, Beijing under Xi Jinping obviously becomes growingly critical of Pyongyang's policies on a number of issues, particularly on the North Korean nuclear issue. A most recent sign of Beijing's increasing concern about North Korea's nuclear ambitions is that on September 24, 2013, China took an unprecedented move by publishing a long list of equipment and chemical substances to be banned from export to North Korea for fear that these goods could be used in its increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons programs.⁶ This export control represents the strongest move that Beijing has ever taken toward North Korea. While Beijing's tougher policy toward the North Korean nuclear issue primarily derives from its concern over its own national security, it also implies that Beijing is making efforts to cultivate a more cooperative relationship with Washington on those matters that concern both countries.

While Xi Jinping's new foreign policy initiatives and adjustments are most visible and significant in China's relations with the United States and in territorial disputes in East China Sea and South China Sea, however, many other areas of Beijing's foreign policy are still basically characterized by continuity. For example, China under Xi Jinping continues to promote strategic partnership relations with Russia as a counterweight against Washington's

“pivot” and “rebalancing” policy toward the Asia-Pacific.⁷ As such, Russia, rather than any other country, was the first country that Xi Jinping paid a state visit to after taking office. Xi Jinping also continues to pay attention to China’s relations with developing countries, and in a period of half year after assuming the Chinese president in March 2013, he visited some developing countries in all the major regions, including Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of the Congo of Africa in March, Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica and Mexico of Latin America and the Caribbean (where he also met with the heads of government of other eight Caribbean countries) in June, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan of Central Asia in September and Indonesia and Malaysia of Southeast Asia in October. Obviously, political considerations are well behind Beijing’s diplomacy with developing countries. Xi Jinping’s visit to Latin America and the Caribbean, which is the U.S. backyard, for example, is viewed by analysts as a response to Washington’s “pivot and rebalancing” to the Asia-Pacific.⁸ Xi Jinping’s visit to Indonesia and Malaysia, which will be followed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Brunei, Thailand and Vietnam, is also seen as Beijing’s reaction to Washington’s rebalancing of Asia policy as well as Beijing’s deliberate move to isolate the Philippines, which is seen as a major regional challenger to Beijing’s South China Sea policy.⁹

It is obvious that since Xi Jinping took office, Chinese foreign policy of the past three decades has been critically and carefully revisited and reexamined, and on the basis of a comprehensive evaluation, a new foreign policy strategy has been deliberately formulated, which is designed not only to promote the nation’s economic development and cooperative relations with the outside world but also to more actively and resolutely defend China’s core national interests when such interests are openly and directly infringed upon by other states.¹⁰ As a crucial part of this new foreign policy strategy, Beijing’s U.S. policy has accordingly been reformulated in an attempt to have Chinese-U.S. relations to be defined, stabilized and

institutionalized and to have China's core national interests to be respected by Washington, while at the same time, cultivating a more cooperative relationship with the United States. As a consequence, Xi Jinping's foreign policy has moved away from the previous one that was solely driven by economic development only to a more balanced one that promotes not only economic development but also the defense of national security interests and political interests in the nation's external relations.¹¹

2. Explanation of China's Foreign Policy Adjustment

Generally speaking, Beijing's foreign policy adjustment for the past year is the result of the changed conditions at both the international and domestic settings. At the domestic level, Deng Xiaoping's *tao guang yang hui* foreign policy was proposed and pursued at a time when China was in the early stages of modernization and when the nation was still quite weak economically and vulnerable militarily. Xi Jinping's foreign policy adjustment is obviously occurring at a time when the nation is gaining increasing power and influence as a result of rapid economic growth and military modernization over the past three decades. As a result, with rising economic and military power Beijing becomes growingly confident in dealing with other powers over various bilateral, regional and global issues. But on the other hand, after three decades of learning, Beijing is also clearly aware that in the age of globalization and international interdependence, China could achieve its national objectives only by cooperating actively with the regional and global community.

Beijing's foreign policy adjustment under Xi Jinping's leadership is also unavoidable as a result of a rising dilemma in some of China's foreign policy areas, which has largely been caused by the previous *tao guang yang hui* low profile policy. Under this low profile policy, while China was trying to avoid any conflict with neighboring states and refraining from taking assertive actions at the time when its territorial interests were infringed upon, some of

its neighboring states had stepped up their moves to take advantage of Beijing's *tao guang yang hui* and encroach upon China's interests.¹² Under such circumstances, it becomes inevitable that Xi Jinping, with his own personal courage and determination, has moved toward a more assertive approach to defending what China sees as its core national interests.

In a further analysis, China's new foreign policy orientation under the leadership of Xi Jinping can also be explained by the concept of the "Chinese dream" that Xi Jinping put forward after he took office. Although the idea of the Chinese dream is still subject to elaboration, what has already been clearly conveyed from the concept is that the Chinese dream refers to a vision of collective prosperity for the Chinese people and great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, involving both domestic and external dimensions. Domestically, the most important element of the Chinese dream is to maintain the unchallenged leadership position of the CCP in the country while continuing to pursue further reforms and creating a more prosperous nation for the Chinese people. Externally, the Chinese dream clearly implies a vision of making China a global dominant power in the process of peaceful development and global cooperation.¹³ China's foreign policy adjustment under Xi Jinping can well be explained by his Chinese dream idea.¹⁴

It is also important to note that the personality and leadership style of Xi Jinping is another important factor behind Beijing's foreign policy adjustment and initiatives over the past year, although the Chinese leadership of today is generally collective in nature. Particularly, Xi Jinping seems to be more self-confident in conducting great-power diplomacy and to possess courage and determination in pursuing China's national interests, the personal qualities that were obviously missing in Xi Jinping's predecessors.¹⁵ Moreover, in forging a new relationship with the United States, Xi Jinping is also quite pragmatic and practical, paying more attention to the substance of Sino-U.S. relations rather than diplomatic protocol and

symbolic formalities, as reflected in Xi Jinping's meeting with Obama in an informal setting at Sunnylands in California in June 2013.

At present, there are two major competing views in academia on what Beijing's foreign policy adjustment under Xi Jinping implies. For some observers, Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping is seen as growingly aggressive and expansionist. The most important evidence, according to these analysts, is Beijing's continuing efforts to rapidly modernize its military as well as its assertive policy toward territorial disputes in East China Sea and South China Sea.

For others, however, Chinese foreign policy is viewed basically defensive in nature. In the eyes of these analysts, Beijing's military modernization efforts are not excessive for a huge country like China, which inevitably has quite comprehensive national security needs. Besides, Chinese foreign policy and military policy toward the region is primarily in passive response to U.S. Asia-Pacific policy and military strategy in the region. Furthermore, although Beijing's territorial claims in East China Sea and South China Sea are quite assertive today, they are far from expansionist, as these claims have not gone beyond those of its predecessor, the Republic of China.

Whichever view of the above arguments makes more sense, it is important to note that no matter whether it is under Xi Jinping or before Xi Jinping, the primary objective of Beijing's foreign policy has always been to defend China's "national security," which is interpreted by the Chinese communist leadership as reflected in a number of "core national interests." Among the core national interests that Beijing has explicitly identified, however, the most fundamental one is the maintenance of the communist regime and the ruling position of the Chinese Communist Party, while the security of the nation's territories is seen as of secondary importance. This utmost importance of maintaining the CCP's monopoly of power in China is also explicitly embodied in Xi Jinping's concept of the Chinese dream. It is in this

sense that Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy with respect to territorial disputes is basically used to justify the CCP's rule and support the survival of the communist regime. In case that such an assertive foreign policy on territorial disputes would weaken rather than strengthen the CCP's rule, Beijing's assertiveness in foreign policy would no doubt be quickly reversed.

3. Concluding Remarks

Beijing's foreign policy adjustment, which has been initiated by Xi Jinping after taking office, is far from complete yet. Beijing is still facing major challenges in how to well handle some most prominent and tough issues in its foreign policy, among which are Washington's "pivot" and "rebalancing" policy to the Asia-Pacific, Sino-Japanese rivalry, the Taiwan issue, the North Korea issue and territorial disputes with a number of neighboring countries. Particularly, the new orientation of Xi Jinping's foreign policy on territorial disputes in East China Sea and South China Sea has brought strained relations with Japan, the Philippines, and to a less extent, Vietnam, which have underestimated China's determination of defending its territorial interests under Xi Jinping and have become used to Beijing's previous practice of *tao guang yang hui* over these territorial disputes over time.

In prospect, however, Beijing's foreign policy will continue to focus on cultivating a cooperative relationship with Washington and maintaining a peaceful and cooperative environment in the Asia-Pacific region, as creating a prosperous and powerful nation through continuing economic development is still China's primary national objective, which is far from being accomplished yet and which no Chinese leaders could ever afford distracting from. As such, it can well be expected that Beijing will continue to emphasize peaceful and cooperative development as the main theme of its foreign policy and practice utmost caution in dealing with such touch and volatile issues as territorial disputes with Japan and the Philippines, preventing these disputes from evolving into a crisis whenever possible.

¹ Although the idea of a new pattern of great-power relations between China and the United States had appeared and been circulated within China for quite a long period of time, it was during his meeting with President Obama in early June 2013 that Xi Jinping formally proposed this concept to his U.S. counterpart. See “Why does the United States not refer to ‘a Chinese-U.S. new pattern of great-power relations’?” <http://www.dwnews.com>, September 21, 2013.

² Richard Bush, “US-China New Pattern of Great-Power Relations,” PacNet, Number 40A, Pacific Forum CSIS, Honolulu, Hawaii, June 12, 2013. <http://www.pacforum.org>.

³ BBC, “Chinese leader Xi Jinping joins Obama for summit,” June 2, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22798572>. Interestingly, while the United States clearly wants to define its relations China after Xi came to office, it has not yet openly endorsed the concept of a new pattern of great-power relations as proposed by Beijing.

⁴ Liu Chang, “Washington needs to take concrete steps to promote China-U.S. ties,” *Xinhua*, September 4, 2012, retrieve from *People’s Daily Online*, <http://english.people.com.cn/90883/7935607.html>.

⁵ “President Xi gives speech to Indonesia’s parliament,” *China Daily*, October 2, 2013. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xiapec/2013-10/02/content_17007915_2.htm.

⁶ Jane Perlez, “China Bans Items for Export to North Korea, Fearing Their Use in Weapons,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/world/asia/china-bans-certain-north-korean-exports-for-fear-of-weapons-use.html?_r=0.

⁷ For Washington’s “pivot” and “rebalance” policy toward the Asia-Pacific, see Robert G. Sutter, Michael E. Brown, and Timothy J. A. Adamson, with Mike M. Mochizuki and Deepa Ollapally “Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Stability,” Elliott School of International Affairs and Sigure Center for Asian Studies, The George Washington University, August 2013. <http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org> and <http://www.gwu.edu/~sigur/>.

⁸ “From pivot to twirl: The Chinese leader tries a smooth move in America’s backyard,” *The Economist*, June 8th, 2013.

⁹ Zhao Wangyi, “Xi and Li visit Southeast Asia in response to U.S. return-Asia policy” (赵琬仪, “习李访东南亚: 还击美重返亚洲政策”), *United Morning News (联合早报)*, October 6, 2013. <http://www.zaobao.com>.

¹⁰ Teng Jianjun, “Changing driving forces of China’s diplomacy” (滕建群, “中国外交的源动力在变”), *United Morning News (联合早报)*, August 31, 2013. <http://www.zaobao.com>.

¹¹ “China’s foreign policy adjustment: Li Keqiang’s proposes a new security concept, ‘chopsticks theory’” (中国外交政策调整, 李克强“筷子论”倡新安全观), *Boxun*, October 11, 2013. <http://boxun.com/news/gb/china/2013/10/201310111655.shtml#.Ulf8OICkpA0>.

¹² Using the words of a Chinese official in charge of foreign affairs, “even small powers could ignore and bully China.” Teng Jianjun, “Changing driving forces of China’s diplomacy.”

¹³ *Xinhua*, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>, March 17, 2013; *People’s Daily*, March 19, 2013.

¹⁴ “Yang Jiechi summarizes Xi Jinping’s diplomacy: the Chinese dream will benefit both the Chinese and other peoples” (杨洁篪总结习式外交: 中国梦将惠己及人), *DW News*, September 11, 2013. <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2013-09-11/59327702.html>.

¹⁵ Pu Xiaoyu, “Will China pursue hardline diplomacy during the Xi Jinping era?” (蒲晓宇, “习近平时代的中国外交会趋于强势吗?”), *DW News*, October 3, 2013. <http://opinion.dwnews.com/news/2013-10-03/59334479.html>.