Hu-Xi: An Examination of Shifts in Chinese Foreign Policy from 2002 to the Present Day

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Abstract

Traditionally, Chinese foreign policy has strived to “conceal strengths and bide time” (韬光养晦 *taoguang yanghui*), from Deng Xiaoping’s (1978-1987) focus on domestic reforms rather than attempting to carve out a sphere of influence. This matched China’s gradual reintegration into the global order under Hu Jintao’s leadership (2002-2012) as Western interests were increasingly accommodated in international relations. On age-old questions, such as the position of Taiwan or China’s role as a regional power, the government worked with other powers towards a peaceable solution. Since the ascension of Xi Jinping in 2012, however, Chinese foreign policy has seen a shift towards active policies leaning towards the assertion of political power through his formulation of a “new form of international relations” (新型 *xinxing*). It has renewed grievances with regional foes, raising the stakes in conflicts that were once thought resolved. Internationally, it has attempted to establish an independent source of power from the West, building an alliance of authoritarian states, such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran, to counter Western hegemony. This study explores the manifestations of this shift in foreign policy from the presidency of Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping and evaluates the potential reasons that may explain its development.

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Introduction

The violent birth of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 was a ticking time-bomb for the hegemony the United States sought in the world order. For decades China laid dormant, preoccupied with the convulsions of internal upheaval and limited to providing support to the nations of the Third World while not playing a leading role in global affairs. By the turn of the century, however, it had re-emerged onto the world stage, ready to reclaim the far-reaching influence of its storied past. Little could be done to restrain this nation of high ambitions to fulfill, a billion people to feed, and a century of humiliation—from the Opium Wars (1839 and 1856) to the unequal treaties with the West (1842-1915)—to right.

Western observers viewed the Chinese rebirth with great trepidation. Many suspected it would follow the path of the now-defunct Soviet Union in vigorously challenging US domination in international affairs, carrying on the mantle of a global-scale competition that the US had thought finished. Yet others held out hope that the abandonment of Mao-era orthodoxy, and the pragmatic reforms of Deng and his successors, could put China on a different path of coexistence and cooperation, paving the way for its full reintegration into the world order.

The elevation of Hu Jintao as paramount leader in 2002 endorsed this latter view. Here was a leader who emphasised explicitly "harmonious co-existence" with the West to facilitate China's "peaceful rise", a techno-bureaucrat open to Western interests who seemed the culmination of Deng's break with Mao. On the world stage, Hu reaffirmed ties with the West and mended broken relationships, quietly dropping the call for "global struggle" that had been the mainstay of every Party report since 1949. It seemed that China had merely taken the longer route to development, and would now take its allotted place as a regional power within the Western global order.

As quickly as they had arisen, however, hopes of a peaceful Chinese rise were challenged by the succession of Hu by Xi Jinping in 2012. Under Xi, China was once again positioned as a competitor to Western hegemony, resuming belligerence with its immediate neighbours while the tendrils of its trademark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stretched around the developing world, a faint echo of the ancient imperial tribute system. Where Hu attempted to make bedfellows with the West, China under Xi has revived its Mao-era call for solidarity among developing countries, claiming leadership of them in a revolt against the Western-imposed Washington Consensus (Jarso, 2018).

Yet the sea-change in rhetoric under the Xi administration belies fundamental continuities between him and his predecessor. For one, the tight mesh of trade linking China and the West has persisted and, excepting temporary deviations, strengthened, naturally restraining the

degree to which China could truly challenge the world order per se. Rather than challenging them, China has also attempted to show leadership in international organisations, recognising that the West's increasing unwillingness to support them, in light of domestic political shifts, is a vital opportunity for extending Chinese influence.

It is likely that the re-emergence of China as a world power will be the most important geopolitical shift of this part of the century. Understanding China's foreign policy in its most modern incarnation, and what the preceding shifts demonstrate about the underlying motivations behind its often opaque government, is therefore crucial in understanding the world order to come.

Literature Review

Anderson (1981) claims that the unpredictability of international politics places value on the appearance of consistency. As such, countries aim to have a consistent ideological justification for their course of action in foreign affairs. This limits the range of acceptable alternative policies, since ideologically untenable courses of action are struck out. This makes foreign policy decisions largely dependent on the psychological and ideological dispositions of their decision makers. This is especially so when organisations very often do not have singular goals that are clearly articulated. Even if they do, humans often don't have the capacity to process every piece of information so decision-makers satisfice, choosing the first acceptable alternative (Simon, 1955). Heightened here is the role of personality in foreign policy, which we will examine among other factors.

A Brief History of Chinese Foreign Policy

China's foreign policy demonstrates just such a propensity for change throughout its history as each leader has adopted foreign policy decisions that have differed from their predecessors, depending on their priorities and the context of China's domestic political landscape. Wei and Fu (2013) suggest that China holds 4 identities, which it chooses between depending on the context and issue: as a developing country, an emerging power, a cornerstone of global institutions, and a superpower that rivals the United States. The navigation between these disparate identities depends in large part upon Chinese self-perception, as argued by Weissman (2015). For Weissmann, a seeming paradox underpins much of China's foreign policy. On the one hand, left relatively unscathed by crises such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis compared to the United States and Europe, China views itself as superior, with the right to "rule the world" (Jacques, 2009). On the other hand, as a product of its Hundred Years of Humiliation, China views itself as "weak and insecure" in the face of threats both within and without.

Historically, it was Deng Xiaoping who led the internal shift towards a greater degree of international engagement. Mederios and Fravel posit that such a pivot hinged on China's own recognition that it could no longer suffer from a 'victim mentality' and instead had to adopt a 'Great Power' mentality (Madeiros & Fravel, 2003). However, the extent to which China asserted itself internationally was still rather limited under Deng, whose "Deng Xiaoping Theory" advocated "*taoguang yanghui*" (韬光养晦), a doctrine which entailed a China that "kep[t] a low profile" and "bide[d] its time" by obscuring its true capabilities until it was able to rival the dominance of global superpowers (Zhongying, 2020). Specifically, *taoguang yanghui*, over the years, has entailed several 'No's (不), some of which notably include a refusal to become a global hegemon, a refusal to export its ideology to other countries, a 'no strings attached' policy for developmental aid and non-interference. Such was the influence of *taoguang yanghui* that Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, continued with the theme of passivity and non-confrontation as Jiang "carried forward" Mao's Five Principles of Coexistence along with Deng's *taoguang yanghui* (Kawashima, 2020).

China's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Xi Jinping (2012-present) pursued radically different approaches to foreign policy during their tenures.

Peaceful Rise

Hu continued in the tradition of Deng Xiaoping, reviving the use of *taoguang yanghui* in foreign policy documents, while contributing with new slogans. Specifically, Hu pioneered the use of the phrase "peaceful rise" to describe China's ascendancy to the world stage, emphasising the role of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" in foreign policy communication[1]. This rhetorical position was borne out in practice. Hu continued the policy of non-intervention in external affairs begun under Deng, a break with Mao's policy of supporting global insurgent efforts (Lovell, 2019). He further emphasised the role of improving Chinese relations with the West and working within multilateral institutions. According to Madeiros (2009), Hu Jintao's view of a "harmonious world"[2] is one in which states "act in ways that respect each other's

[1] These are:

1. mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty,
2. mutual non-aggression,
3. mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs,
4. equality and mutual benefit, and
5. peaceful co-existing.

[2] 和谐世界 *hexie shijie*

national sovereignty, tolerate diversity (in national political systems and values), and promote national development by equitably spreading economic benefits".

***Xin Xing*: A New Model of International Relations**

Xi notably detracted from the theme of a "peaceful" rise or development of China. He never once used the phrase "*taoguang yanghui*" in his speeches, instead installing the narrative of a "New Model of International Relations" (新型 *xinxing*) as the dominant foreign policy priority of China in its place. *Xin Xing* is far more assertive in the official rhetoric it employs; it describes China as a "new major country" and its "new neighbourhood policy" sees it taking a far more dominant role in shaping interstate relations throughout Asia and the rest of the globe (Pang, 2020).[3] In practice, Xi's China has been increasingly expansionary and assertive in its relations with the international community.

Case Studies

China's Relations in the Asia-Pacific Region

Hu called for a "harmonious world" in which states respected each other's national sovereignty, tolerated political diversity (in terms of systems and values) and promoted equitable economic development (People's Daily, 2006), which manifested itself in China's approaches towards Japan and Taiwan, both of whom have had a historically rocky relationship with the country. For the former, Sino-Japanese relations have long been plagued by controversies over former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine honouring fallen Japanese soldiers, a symbol of her bloodstained military history. A thawing in relations then began after Shinzo Abe assumed the title of Prime Minister, with his 2006 visit to China, and culminated in Hu's official visit to Japan in May 2008—the first in more than a decade. The visit generally entailed the promotion of a "mutually beneficial relationship" between China and Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2008), as the two nations even pledged to "maintain close communication and strengthen their coordination and cooperation regarding issues in [the Asia-Pacific region]".

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[3] The "new" tenets of *Xin Xing* for the *Xin Shi Dai* (新时代, new era) include

1. "New major country"（新型大国）
2. "New international relations"（新型国际关系) and "New major country relations" (新型大国际关系)
3. "New neighbourhood policy" and "New thinking and new approaches" (中国的周边区域观回归与新秩序构建)
4. "New outlook of global governance" (新型全球治理观, *xinxing quanqiu zhiliguan*)

Indeed, Hu's determination to fulfil his vision even extended as far as to his attempts to reconcile relations with Taiwan, a territory struggling with its political status vis-a-vis China. China's initial relations with the territory under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) president Chen Shui-Bian were marked by colder, yet familiar procedures—refusals to hold talks without preconditions, as well as Hu's open commitment to Chinese reunification which opposed Chen's pro-independence stance. The early period also saw hints of more aggressive military confrontation with the passing of the Anti-Secession Law by China in March 2005, meant to prevent "Taiwan's secession from China"[4] by threatening the use of "non-peaceful"[5] means including the military. Unsurprisingly, this declaration likewise drew flak from the international community for its outward threat of the use of violence against Taiwan.

It was only after Ma Ying-Jeou's winning of the Taiwanese presidency in March 2008 under the Kuomintang (KMT) banner that China's approach softened, borne out of Hu's increased contacts with the KMT that resulted in a meeting between him and then-chairman Lien Chan in the 2005 Pan-Blue visits, where both affirmed their alignment of beliefs in the "One China Policy''. Subsequent meetings between Hu and Taiwanese Vice President Vincent Siew in April 2008 and KMT chairman Wu Poh-Hsiung in May 2008 thereafter saw further strengthening of ties between China and Taiwan as the two sought mutual benefit: the latter led to Wu committing the Taiwanese government **against** independence, while Hu committed his government to addressing the Taiwanese people's security and dignity concerns, as well as that of an "international living space".

Xi's approach towards Taiwan, on the other hand, demonstrates a substantially more hard-line attitude towards foreign policy—in line with his vision to rejuvenate the Chinese nation through greater assertiveness (Economy, 2014). While Hu had lain the diplomatic groundwork for Xi's historic meeting with Ma Ying-Jeou in 2015[6], Xi has reverted to more ostensible fear tactics in keeping Taiwan's separatist sentiments in check, warning that Taiwan would face the "punishment of history" for any secession attempts in March 2018 (Wen & Qiu, 2018); in January 2019 Xi adopted a more interventionist stance, calling for Taiwan's rejection of its current independence from China, invoking the Anti-Secession Law by "[making] no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means." (Kuo, 2019). Thus, in contrast to Hu's more consultative approach towards Taiwan, Xi's approach is steeped in traditional Chinese assertiveness which is likely to persist, with the DPP taking the reins again after their electoral victory in January 2020.

[4] Under Article one.
[5] Under Article six.
[6] This was the first time the political leaders of Taiwan and China had met since 1950.

Xi's handling of the South China Sea disputes have likewise illustrated his fixation with asserting the state's territorial sovereignty. Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated with China's refusal to negotiate with regard to their territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands, evidenced by its outright rejection of a vote by the Ishigaki City Council in June 2020 to change the area's name, vehemently responding that "the islands belong to the Republic of China" (The News Lens, 2020). Moreover, the threat of military force has been evinced yet again, with the declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea in November 2013 (Osawa, 2013), in response to Japan's claims. On the same note, reports of China constructing an airfield on the disputed Fiery Cross Reef in April 2015 have underscored Xi's explicit insistence on cementing the sovereignty of China's claimed territories (BBC News, 2015), through a more confrontational means of establishing soft power (Kalimuddin & Anderson, 2018) over the region.

Hu's and Xi's foreign policy principles with regard to China's Asia-Pacific relations hence demonstrate marked differences in their methods of engagement—while Hu's consultative politics took shape in negotiations and reconciliations, Xi's assertiveness has seen the rise of more combative confrontations, in terms of both rhetoric and policy.

Chinese Participation in International Institutions

China's participation in international institutions is rooted in the 1990s, when it engaged in all fronts looking outwards in pursuit of "comprehensive power" (Weissman, 2015). While it has focused on economic cooperation and trust-building, China's "striving for achievement" approach consisted of moves to gain political capital within the status quo. This has been characterised by a balance of *inclusive* mechanisms, in which it engages in the Western liberal order, and *exclusive* mechanisms, wherein Western powers are excluded (Feng & He, 2017). While there is some continuity in China's inclusive institutional balancing across Hu and Xi, there is a notable expansion in exclusive institutional balancing under Xi, and China has shifted from inclusive to exclusive balancing in some domains.

Inclusive Challenge to Institutions

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)[7], China wields a considerable amount of power on the global stage. Historically, China's main objectives at the UN centered around development, economic, and social issues (Feltman, 2020), as well as an additional emphasis on the protection of national sovereignty; an aftereffect of its Hundred Years of Humiliation as mentioned earlier. These involved an active non-intervention in the

[7] According to the Charter of the United Nations, the UNSC is charged with ensuring international peace and security. Its powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations, enacting international sanctions, and authorizing military action.

domestic conflicts of other countries, present in Hu and Xi's rule. Nevertheless, China has worked within the constraints of the UN to advance a more assertive foreign policy agenda under Xi, who oversaw China's embrace of security concerns in the UNSC. In 2015, Xi devoted a $1 billion fund for peace and development consisting of security projects, and China has increasingly made use of its veto power, up to 16 times by 2020 (Ibid.).

Exclusive Challenge to Institutions

Responding to America's 'pivot' towards Asia, Xi created exclusive institutions to counter American hegemony. This involved a fundamental rethinking of the liberal world order. In 2014, he proposed a new Asian security concept in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) that precluded the United States. Particularly striking to analysts is Xi's declaration that "it is necessary to advocate common, comprehensive, co-operative, and sustainable security in Asia," which while ambiguous, is construed as a message to other Asian countries that it is time to withdraw from the US security infrastructure in pursuit of an Asian one. This is indicative of a more explicit reformist attitude in China's interactions with the world order, showing a desire to create parallel institutions wherein it has greater leverage.

In the economic realm, too, Xi Jinping's China has created new institutions to counter the prevailing dominance of the United States. In 2014, Xi guaranteed the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) with the BRICS countries. Based in Shanghai, this bank would bypass the stringent lending requirements of the World Bank to provide access to capital to the BRICS countries. As of 2019, the NDB has transacted loans of up to $10.2 billion. (Wihtol, 2019). This was followed by China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015, positioning the AIIB as a rival institution to the IMF, and using it to fund infrastructure projects in the developing world. This consists of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects that enhance China's economic soft power by making developing countries reliant on Chinese credit.

Reasons for the Shift

Shifts in domestic conditions between Hu and Xi are significant contributing factors to the foreign policy approaches of the two leaders. Every Chinese leader has ruled from and with the authority of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), effectively the highest organ of the Chinese state. However, the degree to which they make decisions in consultation with the committee significantly differs between administrations. Although this is difficult to fully verify, many observers believe that Hu Jintao ruled in a much more consultative fashion, on the advice of his PSC, whereas Xi Jinping took direct control of most sectors of state power.

Cheng (2016) describes how, during and prior to the Hu Jintao era, Chinese leadership had undergone a trend of collectivisation, shifting away from the strongman rule that had characterised the regimes of Mao and Deng. In Hu's time, the position of chairman was seen as the "first among equals" and ruled in concert with the other PSC members. Specifically, two factions in Chinese politics have emerged in the modern era. The first, the Jiang-Xi camp[8], comprises close allies of party elites and revolutionary leaders, with the partnership of Jiang Zemin and Xi Jinping at its core; the other, the Hu-Li camp[9], is primarily made up of rural cadres and had its leadership in Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang. At the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, the Jiang-Xi camp won the overwhelming majority of seats, leaving the Hu-Li faction with Li Keqiang as its sole representative. As such, the absence of effective checks on Xi Jinping's bloc has allowed him to pursue a much more active foreign policy with greater impunity, in contrast the more balanced approach Hu Jintao was forced to adopt.

Equally important has been the waning fortunes of China's primary competitors, allowing it the space to become more assertive in international affairs. Unlike the post-Cold War era of Western hegemony, the West has become gradually more insular and less involved in foreign affairs over the past ten years, with the turning point being the financial crisis of 2008-9. While the crisis was deadly to many Western industries and hamstrung Western economies for months, it left China relatively unaffected (Weissman, 2015). China thus adopted its "New Security Concept" with far greater vigour, intensifying efforts to expand in international spheres. In more recent times, Western actors have stepped back even further, with the US dramatically reducing its commitments overseas and the EU stepping down foreign outreach with a resurgence of right-wing nationalism. The contrast between the triumphant West of Hu Jintao's reign and the contractionary West of Xi Jinping's governance is thus an important factor in the differing stances of the two.

However, it is crucial not to overstate the degree to which Hu and Xi differ. In many ways, they more closely resemble each other than predecessors like Mao. Most importantly, neither has come into direct conflict with the West nor denounced the West on the world stage, a far cry from the routine declamations of the Mao era. The underlying reason for this is the strong economic integration of China with the world that has characterised both the Hu and Xi regimes. Since the programme of "reform and opening up"[10] began in 1978, China's economy has grown intertwined with the West's, a trend that Xi Jinping has not reversed (Yang, 2020). Hence, outright conflict with the West, whether economically or militarily, would be severely damaging to China, likely why the assertive foreign policy of Xi has not gone to this extent.

[8] 江习阵营 *jiang xi zhenying*
[9] 胡李阵营 *hu li zhenying*
[10] 改革开放 *gaige kaifang*

Conclusion

It is undeniable that China under Xi has taken a concerted effort to assert itself on the world stage in a much more pronounced way than before. What remains to be seen is whether China's role will evolve to more closely approximate the role that Western powers once played in the global sphere as a "responsible" leader (Chan, 2013) and the extent to which China seeks hegemony. Indeed, scholars have posited that China's rise has changed the international order dramatically. China represents a credible threat to the unipolar world order built around the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, giving rise to a bipolar world (Yeisley, 2011). Developments surrounding China's expansion will have to be followed closely by countries aplenty. In what ways these anxieties may manifest is the subject of a future scholarly endeavour.

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