

# Hu Jintao's Foreign Policy Legacy

Written by Suisheng Zhao

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SUISHENG ZHAO, DEC 8 2012

Hu Jintao presided China's phenomenal rise as a global power and its turn toward a strident direction in foreign affairs. Hu's foreign policy legacy, therefore, can be found by the answers to the following three important questions. First, to what extent did Hu abandon Deng's low profile diplomacy and reoriented Chinese foreign policy in a more assertive or even aggressive direction supported by its new quotient of wealth and power? Second, how did the Hu leadership perceive China's geopolitical position in making China's foreign policy? Third, was China under Hu ready to take a global leadership role and responsibility as a rising great power? Seeking answers to these questions, this short essay argues that while the Hu leadership never openly abandoned Deng's low profile foreign policy, China was increasingly assertive in defense of the so-called core national interests, reacting stridently to all perceived slights to its national pride and sovereignty. At Hu's departure, China was in tension with both Western powers and its Asian neighbors, making China "one of the loneliest rising powers in world history."<sup>1</sup> This was a reflection of the Hu leadership's confidence, frustration, and insecurity in the making of China's foreign policy. As a result, China was still obsessed by its immediate interests in response to the daunting internal and external challenges to its regime survival and territorial integrity. Hu thus left a strident and confident as well as frustrated and insecure China in the search for its rightful place.

### The Strident Turn to Pursue Core Interests

When Hu took over China's leadership, he followed the *taoguangyanghui* policy—hiding its capabilities, focusing on its national strength-building, and biding its time—set by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s to avoid confronting the US and other Western powers because China's circumscribed national strength and geostrategic position did not allow it to exert big enough clout. As a result, Beijing made pragmatic accommodations to "learning to live with the hegemon," i.e., making adaptation and policy adjustment to accord with the reality of US dominance in the international system and because the US held the key to China's continuing modernization efforts.<sup>2</sup> In relations with its Asian-neighbors, Beijing continued a "*mulin zhengce*" (good neighboring policy) to create a peaceful regional environment conducive to its economic development.

Weathering the global economic slowdown better than many Western countries and overtaking Japan as the world's second-largest economy at the end of the Hu administration, China's foreign policy made a strident turn as China's core national interests, defined as "the bottom-line of national survival" and essentially nonnegotiable,<sup>3</sup> suddenly became a fashionable term, appearing more and more frequent in the speeches of Chinese leaders and official publications. Chosen obviously with intent to signal the resolve in China's rising power aspirations, Chinese leaders steadily included more and more controversial issues in the expanding list of China's core interests. Pursuing the core interests, China reoriented its foreign policy in a more assertive direction.

In its relationship with Western countries, China no longer avoided appearing confrontational, "berating American officials for the global economic crisis, stage-managing President Obama's visit to China in November, refusing to back a tougher climate change agreement in Copenhagen and standing fast against American demands for tough new Security Council sanctions against Iran."<sup>4</sup> With Western economies floundering and Chinese economic and diplomatic clout rising, a perception of the US in heavy debt to China but still attempting to leverage its superiority to keep China down made Chinese leaders less willing to make adaptation and more ready to challenge the US in defending what they called core interests. In response to US President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama in early

# Hu Jintao's Foreign Policy Legacy

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2010, instead of following the low profile dictum, China reminded the West of the tough statement that Deng once made: "no one should expect China to swallow the bitter fruit that hurts its interest."<sup>5</sup>

In its relations with Asian-Pacific neighbours Beijing asserted its core interests to prevail in maritime territorial disputes, even at the expense of appearing the villain. For many decades after the founding of the PRC, China pursued a delaying strategy to avoid using force and escalating the conflicts. In the last two years of the Hu leadership, China embarked on a new pattern of aggressively asserting its suzerainty and sovereignty over the disputed maritime territories. As a reflection, although China's official statements on core interest issues involving sovereignty and territorial integrity referred almost exclusively to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang,<sup>6</sup> Chinese leaders expanded the core interest issues in 2009 to include the maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, where China confronts a mosaic of disputes over islands and seas also claimed by Southeast Asian nations. Deploying more personnel and installing new equipment to carry out regular sea patrols and law enforcement more frequently and forcefully in the South and East China Seas, China made strong reactions to a chain of incidents in 2009-2012, including China's repeated attempts to prevent Vietnamese and Philippine vessels from exploring oil and gas in disputed waters in the South China Sea and China's punitive actions during the Sino-Japanese standoff over Japan's detention of a Chinese trawler captain and the Japanese government's decision to nationalise the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. These incidents provoked diplomatic crises during which China displayed its naval warships to support its sovereignty claims. As a result, China's relations with Asia-Pacific countries have come to a low point not seen in many years.

## Confidence, Frustration, and Insecurity

China's strident turn was a reflection of the confidence, frustration, and insecurity of the Hu leadership with the making of foreign policy. China was increasingly confident in its ability to deal with the West and territorial disputes with neighbors, deriving mostly from the enhanced power capacity, particularly its relative success in shrugging off the global financial crisis and maintaining a strong growth trajectory. Perceiving the global balance of power tilting to its favor, China became more willing to proactively shape the external environment rather than passively react to it and forcefully safeguarding its national interests rather than compromise them.

With the increasing confidence, China was frustrated by what it perceived as anti-China forces to prevent China from rising to its rightful place. In particular, China was frustrated by the so-called structural conflict between China as a rising power and the United States as the sole superpower and was therefore convinced that the US would never give up the policy of containing China. Although many Americans blamed China's illiberal political system as one of the main points of friction, the Chinese wondered whether or not conflict would remain and grow starker even if China became democratic, as the US would not want to see China, democratic or not, to be richer and stronger.

This peculiar sense of frustration sustained a popular nationalist sentiment. With a deeply rooted suspicion over the United States and other Western powers and calling for the Chinese government to redeem the past humiliations and take back all "lost territories," popular nationalists asserted increasingly heavy pressures upon the Chinese government to take a confrontational position against the Western powers and adopt tougher measures to claim its maritime territories in the disputes with its Asian neighbors. While the Hu administration came to office and followed its predecessors to make sure that Chinese foreign policy was not dictated by the emotional nationalistic rhetoric, it ended up more willing to follow the nationalist calls to take confrontational position. This strident turn was partially because the government became increasingly responsive to the public opinion as the average Chinese found a growing number of ways to express their nationalist feelings and impose pressure upon China's foreign policy makers to be firm in protecting China's national interests. But more importantly it was because of the convergence of Chinese state nationalism and popular nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Enjoying an inflated sense of empowerment, the Hu government became more willing to play to the popular nationalist gallery in pursuing the core interests.

With the growing confidence and frustration, the Hu administration was also concerned about the economic and political uncertainties at home because China's rapid economic growth not only created huge social, economic and political tensions but also raised expectations of the Chinese people for the performance of the government. Facing serious challenges from growing public demands related to the government's policies on economic and social

# Hu Jintao's Foreign Policy Legacy

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inequality, endemic corruption, epidemic pollution, emaciated health care, shredded social services, entrenched industrial overcapacity and swiftly aging population, ethnic conflict, etc, the Hu leadership knew that their legitimacy depended on their ability to meet the various demands from the society. White-knuckling their way through their final years in office before handing over to the next generation of leaders and nervous about maintaining long-term regime legitimacy and social stability, the Hu government would want to do its best to foster its reputation as protector of national pride and domestic stability and take an assertive stance in defending China's core interests, where national pride and regime survival were seen as at stake.

## Global leadership and Great Power Responsibility

Vigorously pursuing the core interests, China under the Hu leadership was not ready to take on the role of the global leadership and more international responsibilities as a rising global power. At the first China-US Strategic & Economic Dialogue in Washington, D. C. in July 2009, State Councilor Dai Bingguo told his American interlocutors that China's three core interests were maintaining its fundamental system and state security, state sovereignty and territorial integrity and the continued stable development of its economy and society.<sup>8</sup> These were narrowly defined interests having more to do with the preoccupation of the Hu leadership with regime survival and national security than with China's great power aspirations.

Concentrating mostly on its core interests in a fairly narrow sense, China was reluctant and very selective in taking on global and regional responsibilities. An official *Outlook Weekly* article, "Hu Jintao's Viewpoints about the Times," proposed a concept of "shared responsibility," which set two important parameters of Beijing's international responsibility. First, China's contributions to the global commonwealth cannot adversely affect China's core interests. Second, China's international commitments are conditional upon the inputs of other states, especially developed countries and regions such as the United States and the European Union.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Hu's China did not take on a broad international responsibility to be the visionary and magnanimous global player looking beyond its own often desperate and narrowly focused core interests.

Juggling its emerging great power status with its parochially defined core interests, Chinese scholars debated and expressed at least three views on China's changing international role. One view urged the government to abandon the passive "*tiaoguang yanghui*" policy and take a "great power" (*daguo*) responsibility to ensure a "just" world order. The second view called for a modified *taoguangyanghui* policy to give more emphasis on "*youshuo zuowe*" (striking some points/successes). The third view was to continue the low key policy. The first view received most attention in the Western media and was also popular among the Chinese people but it was not the official position of the Hu administration, which took the third view although the second view was the actual policy practice. As an expression of this delicate position, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi had to emphasize the importance of holding on to the low profile policy while called to "act as a responsible big country (power)."<sup>10</sup>

This ambivalent position is a reflection of the dual-identity of China as a rising power and a developing country. While the Hu leadership cherished China's rising power status, it still pretended to be a developing country. Wrapping its great power aspirations in modesty and pointing out that China is still a developing country with only one tenth of the per capita GDP of the US, Premier Wen Jiabao firmly reiterated that "China remains a developing country despite remarkable achievements and its modernization will take a long time and the efforts of several generations."<sup>11</sup> Wen's statement was not simply an expression of modesty because China indeed faced numerous internal social, economic, environmental, demographic and political challenges that could significantly overshadow China's long term economic growth.

## Conclusion

The Hu leadership left a complicated foreign policy legacy. Keeping its head low for many years, China raised its head and made a strident turn in its foreign policy. Growingly confident in its increasing power and influence, it, however, was increasingly frustrated by the perceived containment of the Western powers. In the meantime, the regime's fear of many social, economic and political uncertainties at home also played an important role in Hu's foreign policy making. Constantly struggling to find a balance between taking a broad great power responsibility and

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focusing on its narrowly defined core interests to play down its pretense of being a global power, China was never “psychologically prepared to play a full ‘great power’ leadership role in confronting problems.”<sup>12</sup> Beijing’s assertiveness, therefore, was not joined with a broader vision, making China often reluctant to shoulder greater international responsibilities.

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## **Hu Jintao's Foreign Policy Legacy**

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