

# Analysing Chinese Foreign Policy

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/01/26/analysing-chinese-foreign-policy/>

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China's re-emergence as a military and economic power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been analysed through the lens of realism, which believes that as China's material capabilities grow, it would become expansionist. However, realism does not explain: (1) why China's foreign policy have become more assertive and confident under Xi Jinping as compared his predecessors, and (2) China's growing interests in reforming the international system. As such, I argue from the Interpretative Actor Model perspective that Xi's personality of being forceful, ambitious and Machiavellian is key to understanding China's foreign policy since 2013. I employ Waltz's three levels of foreign policy analysis – the state, the individual, and the international levels – to show how Xi's personality has permeated throughout China's foreign policy at all levels. It is also noteworthy that China's foreign policy under Xi has generated mixed receptions among the international community, which could affect China's security and economy in the future.

China's re-emergence as an economic and military power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has generated mixed views among the international community. Some states have viewed China's assertiveness, especially over territorial disputes, as a threat to international peace and stability, while others have viewed China's economic development as beneficial for the global economy. Most analysis of China's foreign policy have centred on realism, which suggests that as China's material capabilities grow, it would seek to expand its power regionally and internationally (Kirshner, 2012; Li, 2016).

While realists are right in pointing out the salience of material capabilities in analysing China's foreign policy, I argue that it is insufficient in understanding why China's foreign policy has become more assertive and confident in recent years. Instead, I argue from an Interpretative Actor Model perspective that Xi Jinping's personality of being forceful, ambitious, and Machiavellian is the most important driver for China's foreign policy since 2013. Xi's presidency differs from the "Keeping a Low Profile" policy instituted by Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s to cultivate an image of a non-threatening China to facilitate trade and diplomatic relations with the world (Yan, 2014). This policy has been sustained under the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations, and although there have been calls by the West for China to play a greater role in global governance during the early 2000s, China has been reluctant to take up such leadership positions. However, under Xi, he has advocated for China to "Strive for Achievements" to realise "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" in the military, economic, and cultural realms. To that end, he has embarked on a series of military and economic reforms, and increased China's international profile, making China's foreign policy more uncompromising and ambitious at the state and international level.

I employ the Interpretative Actor Model to analyse how Xi's personality impacts China's foreign policy. Additionally, I use Waltz's (2001) three levels of foreign policy analysis – the individual, state and international levels – to highlight how Xi's personality has permeated throughout China's foreign policy at all levels. This paper proceeds as follows: the first section provides a brief theoretical background into the Interpretative Actor Model and realism. Subsequently, the second section examines Xi's personality and his influence on China's foreign policy. Lastly, the third and fourth sections cover China's foreign policy at the state and international level.

### Theoretical Background: Interpretative Actor Model and Realism

Social Constructivism focuses on the intersubjective understanding of reality, which is shaped by a country's history, culture, and socio-economic conditions (March and Olsen, 1989; Wendt, 1992). Additionally, Social Constructivism emphasises structures, such as social norms and rules in influencing individuals' actions. While the Interpretative

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Actor Model also underscores the importance of an intersubjective understanding of reality, it takes actors' thoughts, beliefs and actions as the main unit of foreign policy analysis (Carlnaes, 1992). According to Hollis and Smith (1991: 74), "the foreign policy behaviour of states depends on how individuals with power perceive and analyse situations." As such, foreign policy decisions can be driven by an individual's beliefs and perceptions.

In contrast, realists believe that states are rational actors seeking to maximise their security and survival amidst the anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). Further, states are likely to engage in internal balancing against a hegemon by leveraging on hard-power capabilities such as its military and economy. However, some states lack sufficient hard-power and would build alliances with other stronger states to balance against a hegemon (Waltz, 1979).

## **Individual: Xi Jinping's Personality Shapes Current Chinese Foreign Policy**

One weakness of realism is that it assumes that states would always behave rationally to maximise their power, and they view China as a rising power seeking to expand its influence regionally and internationally. However, this fails to acknowledge the role personalities play in shaping relations between states. Instead, I argue that Xi's personality of being forceful, Machiavellian, and ambitious is key to understanding China's uncompromising and confident foreign policy in the past decade.

Xi's forcefulness is driven by his formative experiences of hardships during the Cultural Revolution, and this influenced his pursuit of security for China. During the Cultural Revolution, Xi was sent down to the countryside in Yan'an where he was subjected to hard labour and poor living conditions (Foreign Policy, 2019). Here, Xi witnessed the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in maintaining China's political stability and survival amidst chaos, and these experiences made him a determined leader in governing China. Since taking power in 2013, Xi has implemented tough measures internally and externally to protect China's security and development interests. For example, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi has vowed to resolutely oppose "Taiwanese Independence" and while Xi seeks a peaceful reunification with Taiwan, he reiterates that China will "never promise to renounce the use of force" to reclaim Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Xi is also a Machiavellian politician who has outmanoeuvred and suppressed his political rivals to consolidate foreign-policy decision-making within himself. Xi faces opposition from two main camps, namely the reformers within the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The reformers sought to push for better relations with the US and the West, while the PLA opposes military reform as it affects the economic and political interests of high-ranking military officials (Foreign Policy, 2022; You, 2018). To overcome these challenges, Xi launched a party-wide anticorruption campaign to remove his political opponents, and bent official and unofficial party rules to install key political allies within the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) (Lee, 2022). Further, Xi has made himself chairman of the foreign and defence policy Central Leading Groups (CLG) within the CCP, which differed from Hu and Jiang's decentralised foreign policy decision-making processes (Char and Bitzinger, 2017; Liao, 2016). Within the PLA, Xi has held the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) since 2018, and has restructured the CMC to promote generals loyal to him (You, 2018). Hence, Xi's centralisation of power has challenged the "collective leadership" principle of the CCP in foreign-policy issues.

Moreover, Xi is an ambitious leader who seeks to realise the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" to make China a respected country internationally (Gill, 2022). One core aspect of Xi's "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" is to make China an economically, militarily, and culturally strong country (Xi, 2018). To that end, Xi has launched many ambitious foreign policy initiatives to raise China's reputation internationally. For instance, Xi launched the Global Development Initiative (GDI) during the 2022 Bo'ao Forum to promote "coordinated and inclusive growth" within the developing world in areas such as poverty alleviation, food security, and climate change (Lowy Institute, 2022).

## **State-Level: Growing Chinese Assertiveness Towards its Immediate Neighbourhood**

The state-level in foreign policy analysis takes the nation-state as actors responding to external conditions and it

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considers a state's military, strategic and economic capabilities in pursuing its national interests. While realists are right in pointing out that China's foreign policy has become more assertive and confident, it is insufficient in explaining why China's forcefulness has intensified under Xi. Instead, I argue that Xi's personality of being uncompromising and strong-willed is the key driver for China's more assertive foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific. However, his assertive foreign policy has produced mixed results for China's security and standing in the region.

A strong "World Class Military" is a core facet of Xi's ambitions to realise the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation", and this was influenced by Xi's beliefs that China's backwardness during the 1839 Opium War caused China's Century of Humiliation<sup>[1]</sup> (Johnston, 2017). Further, Xi has been uncompromising in China's territorial disputes with its neighbours and embarked on a rapid and ambitious military modernisation programme which bolstered the PLA's capabilities to assert and protect China's "Core Interests" in the region<sup>[2]</sup>. For example, in August 2022, China conducted missile and naval drills in the Taiwan Straits in response to US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Taiwan's Ministry of Defence have warned that China has sufficient military capabilities to paralyse Taiwan's defences and would be unable to effectively resist a Chinese invasion (Reuters, 2021). On top of that, China has deployed advanced warships, Anti-Ballistic Ship Missiles (ABSMs), and fifth-generation fighter aircraft on reclaimed islands in the South China Sea, generating concerns among China's Southeast Asian neighbours and the US (Grossman, 2020).

According to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) 2022 *State of Southeast Asia Survey*, it finds that 76% of ASEAN respondents were worried about China's "growing regional political and strategic influence" (ISEAS, 2022). Further, on the South China Sea dispute, China has been reluctant to finalise the Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations with ASEAN despite constant pledges by the former to accelerate negotiations (Hu, 2021; The Diplomat, 2022a). Instead, China has continued to use its military might to enforce its claims over the South China Sea as evident from its naval and air-force drills in disputed territory. Therefore, most states in the Asia-Pacific have continued to welcome the US' military presence in the region to balance against China's growing assertiveness, thereby affecting China's security in the region (Koga, 2018).

Besides China's military prowess, Xi has used both negative and positive economic statecraft to uphold China's "core Interests." Economic statecraft refers to the use of economic instruments, such as trade, investments, and financial services, to achieve a state's foreign policy goals (Blanchard and Ripsman, 2013). During Xi's 2013 Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference, he outlined three main objectives of China's peripheral diplomacy: (1) to facilitate an environment conducive to China's security and development interests, (2) build mutual-benefit and win-win cooperation, and (3) solidify friendliness with its neighbours (Wang and Boon, 2019). One key instrument in achieving these goals is the use of trade and investments. According to Mahbubani (2018), China has traditionally used its large markets to build relations with its neighbours while punishing its adversaries. For example, during the 2021 ASEAN-China Summit, China pledged to buy \$150 billion of agricultural goods from ASEAN over the next decade and to provide \$1.5 billion in COVID-19 assistance to ASEAN states over three years (Ha, 2021). Under Xi, China has also been more willing to wield negative economic statecraft to punish its neighbours for undermining China's "Core Interests." For instance, in 2020, China imposed unofficial trade restrictions on Australia for advocating for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic (The Economist, 2020). Hence, this prompted some states in the region to minimise their economic reliance on China to buffer against China's economic retaliation. For example, South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) has sought to diversify its trade links away from China after the latter boycotted South Korea's products following South Korea's decision to install US missile defence systems in 2017, which China perceives as a security threat (Choe, 2021).

Therefore, China's assertive and confident foreign policy under Xi has generated mixed results on both the security and economic dimensions. On the security front, although Xi has managed to modernise the PLA to make it more effective in defending China's "Core Interests," its military build-up and territorial disputes with its neighbours have made China's neighbours and the US more wary of China's regional power. In doing so, Xi has unintentionally strengthened the US' military presence in the region, which consequently worsens China's security situation. On the economic front, Xi's economic engagement with China's neighbours have been generally well received in the region, particularly among ASEAN member states for post-pandemic recovery. However, some states have sought to diversify their trade away from China to insulate themselves against China's economic pressure.

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## International-level: Creating New International Institutions and Norms

Realism focuses mostly on a state's hard-power, such as the military and the economy, and places less emphasis on international institutions. However, this does not explain why China, despite its growing military and economic strength, has devoted greater attention to establishing new international institutions and norms. Instead, I argue that Xi's ambitious and Machiavellian personality in realising the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" to make China a respectable country is vital in understanding China's foreign policy at the international level.

China has been excluded from the formation of key post-WWII institutions due to its diplomatic isolation, and this has affected its ability to influence international norms and rules (Economy, 2021). Currently, these international institutions continue to be dominated by the West and has been increasingly used to pressure China on a myriad of issues, especially on human rights. Furthermore, China perceives the current international order as being inadequate in adjusting to changes in the global economy. For instance, in Xi's 2017 Speech at the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos, he states that "the global economic landscape has changed profoundly in the past few decades. However, the global governance system has not embraced those new changes and is therefore inadequate in terms of representation and inclusiveness." (China Global Television Network, 2017) Although the Asia-Pacific accounts for almost 40% of the world's economic output, insufficient economic resources have been diverted to improving Asia's infrastructure to bolster economic connectivity. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2018), Asia requires almost \$1.3 trillion annually to fund its "infrastructure deficit" for the next decade.

Xi has sought to restore China's historical position as the world's preeminent power by contesting pre-existing international norms and creating new initiatives which puts China in a global leadership position. To that end, Xi has worked to change the international system from within and outside Western-led institutions. According to Economy (2022), Xi has been Machiavellian in challenging existing norms within the UN by artfully portraying China as an international leader and mobilising support from the developing world to balance against the West.

Relating to China as an international leader, China has contributed large amounts of financial resources to support the UN's efforts in addressing challenges confronting the developing world. For example, during the World Health Assembly (WHA) meeting in 2020, Xi announced that China will make COVID-19 vaccines a "public good" for the rest of the world, and this came at the time when the US withdrew from the WHO (Xinhua, 2020). China has since donated more than 2 billion COVID-19 vaccines globally to the developing world, making China the world's second largest vaccine donor, behind the US.

And on the second point, mobilising support from the developing world, China has used its economic influence to coerce and persuade developing states to counter Western attempts to interfere in China's domestic affairs, particularly over human rights. At the same time, China has stressed the principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, which resonates with many developing countries given their adverse experiences with colonialism. For example, China has managed to garner the votes of 19 Muslim and developing states in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to vote against a US-sponsored resolution to investigate China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang (The Diplomat, 2022b).

Outside the UN, Xi established the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013 and 2016 respectively, both of which gives China a leading role in regional and international economic development. For example, China holds the world's largest voting share in the AIIB, which is currently headed by a Chinese national. Within six years of its founding, the AIIB has invested almost \$70 billion in Asia and has more financial resources as compared to the World Bank (Mahbubani, 2021). Additionally, China has invested nearly \$200 billion in the BRI since 2013, which encompasses nearly 138 countries in the world and this provides China with overland access to oil and gas reserves in the Middle East should its access to the South China Sea be cut off (Macaes, 2018; Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Therefore, China's attempts to reshape the international system have been viewed favourably by many developing countries whose voices are often underrepresented at the UN. At the same time, China's initiatives have elicited pushback from the West, which also created new institutions such as the US-led Build Back Better World (B3W) and

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the EU's Global Gateway Project to fund infrastructure development in the third world (White House, 2021; European Union External Action Service, 2021). However, it is still too early to tell if China's initiatives have been successful in restoring China's leadership in global affairs. Nevertheless, I argue that realism fails to account for China's interests in changing international institutions and norms. Instead, I opine that Xi's personality of being Machiavellian and ambitious in restoring China's role as a respected and legitimate power is the key motivating force for China's push to reform the existing international system.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue from an Interpretative Actor Model perspective that Xi's personality is a key driving force for China's assertive and ambitious foreign policy in recent years. While realists are accurate in pointing out that China's growing material power is an important factor in driving its foreign policy, it still does not explain: (1) why China has become more assertive and confident under Xi as compared to his predecessors, and (2) China's growing interests in altering the international system. However, China's foreign policy under Xi has generated mixed receptions over the past decade. On the security front, China's assertiveness in its immediate neighbourhood has led to military pushbacks from the US, which further complicates China's difficult security position in the region. Economically, China continues to be welcomed by the regional and international community due to its large economy. But some states have sought to diversify their economy away from China to become more resilient against China's economic statecraft. Internationally, China's efforts at building new institutions and challenging existing norms have been viewed positively by most of the developing world, but it has also raised concerns among the West about China being a revisionist power. As Xi embarks on his third-term as China's president, his foreign policy will face increasing pressure and scrutiny, while opening up new opportunities for growth and development at the same time.

## Notes

[1] This was reflected in his public speeches such as the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of WWII in 2015 and the 2021 Centenary of the founding of the CCP.

[2] The definition of China's "Core Interests" remains unclear and changes across China's Presidencies. According to Swaine (2011), China's "Core Interests" can be summarised in three objectives: (1) ensuring national sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) preserving China's basic system and national security, and (3) continued stable development of China's economy and society.

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