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“Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: Continuity and Change”
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Since President Xi Jinping took over from his predecessor, Hu Jintao, two years ago, how much of Chinese foreign policy is based on continuity and what's new? How does the Chinese top leadership assess the international environment and China's place in it? Bonnie Glaser, Senior Adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, addresses these questions by examining Chinese leaders' diplomatic rhetoric and their behavior as they implement foreign policies.

According to Glaser, there are both continuity and change in Chinese foreign policy. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence from the Mao era still remain in effect. Since the 18th Party Congress, Chinese top leaders have reiterated that China will continue to pursue an independent foreign policy and will use peaceful means to resolve international conflicts. China tries to make friends around the world and forge partnerships while maintaining its long-standing position of no alliances. Even Pakistan and North Korea are not formally Chinese allies.

There are changes from the Hu Jintao era that are worth paying attention to, however. The concept of "harmonious world," put forward by Hu, is no longer mentioned. Xi has touted the concept of the "China dream" as an embodiment of the Chinese aspiration for national rejuvenation from a century of foreign humiliation. He has applied the China Dream to Beijing's foreign relations, specifically in the Asia-Pacific region.

How Chinese top leaders assess the political trend of the world and their place in it is critical in shaping their outlook to the world. Foreign policy is formulated based on China's assessment of the international situation and the global balance of power. Peace and development importantly remains the main theme of the times, but there have been changes in China's description of the "the new situation." In recent years, the Chinese have become more aware of their enhanced capabilities in both economic and military realms. They see the relative power of the U.S. declining and China re-gaining upward momentum in an increasingly multi-polar world; therefore China is in "an increasingly favorable international environment." This view first appeared with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis and has become more pronounced.

Xi appears more confident on the world stage than his predecessors, wishing to have a voice and a foreign policy befitting a major power. Under Xi's leadership, China is adopting a much more activist foreign policy to defend and advance Chinese interests. The Chinese want a greater say, proportional to their nation’s growing stature, in shaping the international discourse. Xi has called for China and its immediate neighbors—Asian countries—to solve security challenges and he has proposed creating a new regional security architecture that would exclude the United States. China favors regional security forums in which the US is not a member, such as the
Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN plus 1, ASEAN plus 3, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). In the international economic arena, China is in the process of setting up an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and a BRICS Development Bank, while pushing for reforms of the existing international monetary system and internationalization of the RMB. It remains to be seen the extent to which China hopes to adjust the post-World War II international system.

China has never publicly repudiated Deng Xiaoping's guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy enunciated in the late 1980s, "observe things serenely, respond and manage things calmly, hold our ground firmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, accomplish our objectives" (冷静观察，沉着应对，稳住阵脚，韬光养晦，有所作为). But Chinese foreign policy has noticeably changed from having a "low profile" to a more active or proactive disposition and Xi Jinping is explicitly promoting an activist foreign policy. No formulation has been adopted as a new guideline for Chinese foreign policy to replace Deng’s dictum, however.

China increasingly uses its economic clout to wield its influence over other countries, intensifying its neighbors' dependence on China. By binding its neighbors to China, Xi hopes that these nations will "respect" Chinese interests. At the late November Foreign Policy Work Conference, Xi re-ordered the priorities of Chinese foreign policy, placing the periphery at the top, followed by relations with major powers, developing countries, and multilateral forums. On territorial disputes, Chinese foreign policy under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao emphasized Deng's proposal to "shelve disputes and pursue joint development" (搁置争议，共同开发). Xi has reiterated this policy, but has stressed the four characters before this phrase used by Deng Xiaoping, "sovereignty belongs to us" (主权属我). He has called for developing closer relations with China's neighbors while not making any concessions on sovereignty over disputed territory.

Since 2012, Xi Jinping has called for building a new type of major power relations (新型大国关系) with the United States. China persuaded the Obama administration to commit to "mutual respect of each other's core interests" in November 2009, which to China means respect of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, as well as China's political system. The Obama administration has become uneasy with China’s definition and now views the establishment of a new type of major power relations as an aspiration, not a reality.

Glaser notes some changes in Chinese foreign policy behavior that are important to watch closely in the future. China has attached more importance in the past to achieving denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, although it is still unwilling to impose pressure on Pyongyang that could cause instability in North Korea. Xi is disdainful of Kim Jong-un and has halted high-level exchanges with North Korea. Whereas Hu Jintao used economic coercion against Japan and the Philippines, Xi has been less willing to use China's economic leverage for punitive purposes. Xi has attached higher importance to avoiding military accidents. The U.S. and China have engaged in dialogues on crisis management, establishing code of conduct in the event of accidents.
In conclusion, Glaser says that China has a new rhetoric aimed at shaping its international environment and regional security architecture; that change of behavior in Chinese foreign policy is limited and new developments are primarily extensions of previous policy behavior; and that most assertive Chinese policy and behavior are related to territorial integrity and sovereignty issues in the East and South China Sea.