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China's Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change

Politics Jun 15, 2012

Aoyama Rumi [\[Profile\]](#) Aoyama Rumi [\[Profile\]](#)

“Fragmented authoritarianism,” in which multiple domestic actors and their interests influence policy, best describes the power structure that now prevails in China. Professor Aoyama Rumi of Waseda University looks at how this system affects the country’s foreign policy.



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China's Rise Forces a Reevaluation of Its Diplomacy

The Asia Pacific is changing at dizzying speed. The United States declared a “return to Asia” in the fall of 2011, and this was followed by signs of a shift from a strategy of engaging China as part of the global community to one focused on slowing its rise. The US efforts to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership and to enhance military cooperation with Asian allies emerged in the context of a China-US rivalry for regional influence that has become more prominent with each passing year.

China has enjoyed phenomenal economic growth since the 1980s. Its gross domestic product has surpassed \$5 trillion, and it has leap-frogged Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy behind the United States. Meanwhile,

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Since around the middle of the first decade of the new century, discord between China and its neighbors has become prominently visible. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea with the Philippines and Vietnam have become increasingly virulent. In September 2010, a Chinese fishing vessel operating near the Senkaku Islands (which China also claims and calls the “Diaoyu Islands”) collided with a Japan Coast Guard patrol boat, casting a deep chill on the recently improved relations between the two countries. Territorial disputes in the Yellow Sea between China and South Korea have also intensified. In September 2011, Myanmar (Burma), which had previously maintained friendly relations with China, suddenly announced the suspension of the construction of the Myitsone Dam, a large hydroelectric development project that the two countries were undertaking in Myanmar to supply electricity mostly to China.

Given these regional changes, the Chinese government now must reconsider its diplomatic policy. As China’s global presence rapidly expands, it becomes ever more important for us to understand both its past and present diplomatic policy. With an increasingly diverse cast of domestic actors and their interests influencing Chinese diplomacy, “fragmented authoritarianism” has become the perfect descriptor for the present system. Thirty years after China launched its economic reforms and 10 years since it joined the World Trade Organization, Chinese policymaking has changed markedly.

In this article I will look at the foreign policy discussions at the fifth session of the Eleventh National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the fifth session of the Eleventh National People’s Congress, two key national forums influencing China’s foreign policy, and I will attempt to discern the direction and characteristics of this policy in the face of the internal and external factors to which it is subject, with reference to its course in the past.

Foreign Policy Themes at the NPC and CPPCC

From March 3 to 13, 2012, the fifth session of the Eleventh National Committee of the CPPCC took place in Beijing. In the same city, and at nearly the same time—from March 5 to 14—the fifth session of the Eleventh NPC convened. Simultaneously, local people’s congresses and local committees of the CPPCC held meetings throughout China.

In their reporting on these sessions, Japanese and US media focused mainly on China’s increased military spending, its lowering of the economic growth target from 8% in 2011 to 7.5% in 2012, and the fate of former Chongqing Communist Party chief Bo Xilai in relation to the upcoming change of party leaders. They paid little attention to the discussions on foreign policy. However, the points raised at these sessions concerning external strategies were of great significance, inasmuch as they were the first presentation of the Chinese government’s foreign policy stance in response to the “return to Asia” policy of the United States and to the diplomatic difficulties China now faces as a result of the deterioration of relations with its neighbors.

The NPC opened, as it does every year, with the premier, Wen Jiabao, delivering the “government work report,” a summary of key governmental actions. The NPC and CPPCC also featured press conferences by high-ranking officials, including Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Minister of Commerce Chen Deming and Governor of the People’s Bank of China Zhou Xiaochuan. The government work report and press conferences revealed the following four points.

(1) Fiscal 2012 defense spending will increase 11.2% to 670 billion yuan (around ¥8.7



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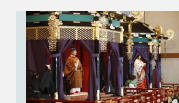
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trillion [“¥” in this article stands for Japanese yen]).

(2) Foreign policy will prioritize China’s national security and sovereignty as it works with other nations for global governance reform and strives to establish a positive national image for itself. To realize these objectives, China will promote reform of the international economic and financial systems, stressing the Group of 20 and other international forums, while continuing it pursue its strategy of promoting free trade agreements and regional integration.

(3) The Chinese government will enhance the risk management of overseas investment by Chinese companies and focus on ensuring the safety of Chinese citizens living overseas.

(4) The Chinese State Council officially approved the [“National Plan on Islands Protection,”](#) which enhances the protection and resource exploration of China’s islands; the plan came into effect on April 19, 2012.

These points clearly show that the foreign policy set forth by the NPC is essentially a continuation of previous policy, with no major changes visible. At the end of 2011, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi summarized Chinese foreign policy during the year as having worked to reform the international system, create a favorable regional environment, stabilize relations with major countries, enhance solidarity and cooperation with developing countries, secure Chinese interests in western Asia and northern Africa, and as having taken important strides in promoting public diplomacy. The foreign policy announced in March 2012 is clearly in line with the previous year’s strategy. China has driven the world economy in recent years, and it has also worked to enhance its own international presence by strengthening economic relations with numerous countries and regions. In a sense it is only natural that the Chinese government is trying to cope with external pressure from the United States by continuing to pursue these existing strategies.

The changes in the international environment China confronts did, however, force it to make some minor adjustments to its foreign policy. Chinese-US relations are becoming increasingly confrontational, and as it grows aware of the increasing backlash against its expanding global presence, China has redoubled its efforts in the area of public diplomacy. Concomitantly, it confronts the new and equally pressing issue of protecting its economic interests overseas.

While working to avoid diplomatic friction, China is strengthening economic cooperation with a large number of regions and countries and exercising leadership on hot-button international issues and at multinational forums as it works to enhance its global influence. To achieve this goal, in recent years the Chinese government has focused on the diplomatic policy issues of national sovereignty, security, economic cooperation, public diplomacy, and the protection of overseas Chinese companies and citizens.

Diplomatic Principles and “Core Interests” Unclear

Under China’s authoritarian regime, the guidelines set forth by the central



Premier Wen Jiabao (right) and President Hu Jintao at the National People’s Congress (March 14, 2012; photo: Mark Ralston/AFP/Jiji).

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leadership are of paramount importance. The fact that diplomatic strategy has remained mostly unchanged despite changes in the global environment is because China's diplomatic principles have also remained unchanged.

Following the adoption of the economic reform program in 1978, the prime mission of Chinese diplomacy was to contribute to the country's economic development. But in 2006, the government added national sovereignty and security to its official list of national interests. In August 2006, at the Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Work, President Hu Jintao proclaimed that Chinese diplomacy should play a role in protecting the country's sovereignty, security, and developmental interests. The protection of national sovereignty, security, and maritime interests had previously been set forth in policy papers by the Chinese navy and [State Oceanic Administration](#), but the identification of these points as part of the required role of Chinese diplomacy in 2006 marked a major policy shift—a shift which eventually led to a tougher stance on island disputes with surrounding countries.

The Chinese government has never made definitive statements on its diplomatic strategy. It has cited sovereignty, security, and development as diplomatic principles, but foreign observers have noted the vagueness of these terms. The *New York Times* [reported](#) that in March 2010 a Chinese government figure unofficially identified the South China Sea as one of China's "core interests." US scholar Michael D. Swaine later [denied the accuracy of this report](#), but it did succeed in creating increased international interest in the question of what those core interests might be.

As if in response to this heightened interest, in August 2011, the *Global Times*—a Chinese tabloid whose parent company is owned by the Communist Party—stated that China's three core interests are economic development, Taiwan, and Tibet. A government white paper published on September 6, 2011, named six: sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, national unity, the Chinese political system, and ensuring sustainable economic and social development. On January 17, 2012, the *People's Daily*, run directly by the Communist Party, asserted that the Senkaku Islands dispute also involved a core interest. With no clear answer from the Chinese government, confusion persists as to what exactly its core interest are.

China's Diversifying Diplomatic Interests and Assertions

The ambiguity surrounding China's diplomatic principles also has a profound impact on foreign policy decision-making and implementation.

Complex Foreign Policy and Maritime Sovereignty Issues

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there have been two chief mechanisms for the formulation of China's foreign policy. Central leadership sets the overall diplomatic strategy and foreign policy on key issues, and central government agencies and local governments are responsible for the formulation and implementation of the routine policy required to carry out the national strategy. The central government agencies, local governments, and corporations all have their own interpretations of the diplomatic principles, which they use to promote their own overseas agendas. This results in multiple strata of different foreign policies within the same country.

The issue of maritime sovereignty is one of the best examples of this complexity. Since China listed national sovereignty and security among its national interests,

maritime disputes with neighbors have intensified. Recent examples include the March 2011 alleged harassment of a Philippine government survey ship by Chinese patrol boats and Vietnam's claim that Chinese vessels deliberately cut cables laid by a Vietnamese survey ship. On March 16, 2012, China sent maritime patrol boats *Haijian 50* and *Haijian 66* to patrol near the Senkaku Islands, sparking renewed friction between Japan and China, as Japan claimed the boats had intruded into its "contiguous zone"—a zone of limited control defined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as extending an additional 12 miles beyond a nation's territorial waters. Yet even as its actions grow bolder and bolder, China has continued to pursue joint development in disputed areas and cooperation in security initiatives. Working-level talks began in the end of 2010 over the specifics of the [🔗 "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea"](#) (signed in 2002 by China and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) with the formation of a joint working group. In a meeting between ASEAN and China in November 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao called for increased working-level cooperation, proposing a China-ASEAN maritime cooperative fund and pledging 3 billion yuan (around ¥36 billion) toward its formation.

The NPC and CPPCC Now Foreign Policy Forums

The CPPCC has been dismissed as the decorative vase of Chinese politics, and the NPC has been seen as a rubber-stamp organization—neither has traditionally been recognized as having any real influence in the Chinese political process. But the roles of these two organs in policymaking have changed significantly in recent years.

The members of the NPC and CPPCC are chosen from various industries and government bodies, and they receive their salaries from the companies or central government agencies and local governments to which they belong. As the representatives thus simultaneously represent the public and either a government body or private-sector company, they can easily become conduits for lobbying. And as both organs form key venues for political discussion, the media has paid increasing attention to them in recent years. Thus, while it is still difficult for proposals from the NPC or CPPCC to actually become law or official government policy, these organs have become policy battlegrounds for different government agencies, local governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations. Their sessions thus offer a prime opportunity for swinging public opinion behind the implementation of various policies. This trend was particularly pronounced in the March 2012 sessions of the regional people's congresses and CPPCCs.

The "beneficiaries" of China's current foreign policy have become its powerful proponents, arguing energetically in favor of its continuation. Both Lieutenant General Kong Ying of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, who is a member of the CPPCC, and retired Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, a national CPPCC member, have championed increased military spending in the Chinese media. They assert that the current levels of spending are inadequate given China's size and the length of its coastline, noting such needs as modernization of military equipment to catch up with developed countries and improvement in the quality of life of armed service members.

Luo Yuan, deputy secretary general of the China Society of Military Science and a national CPPCC member, has proposed the formation of a national coast guard, the establishment of a special South China Sea administrative district, and the publishing of a white paper dedicated to the South China Sea.

Hainan Province has issued similar calls, as the development of the South China

Sea has a strong bearing its own development. Wu Shicun, president of the [National Institute for South China Sea Studies](#) and a CPPCC Hainan Committee member, has advocated the development of disputed areas in the South China Sea. Zhao Zhongshe, director general of the Department of Ocean and Fisheries of Hainan Province and a member of the Hainan people's congress, has called on China to make Hainan the hub of development for the South China Sea, including oil fields, tourism, and fishing. Jiang Dingzhi, governor of Hainan and a member of the Hainan people's congress, has emphasized the importance of the maritime economy and called for enhanced oil development, fishing, and maritime law enforcement.

Active New Policy Initiatives

Groups that have not previously been involved in important foreign policy matters have also begun to express their desire to be included. For example Yin Hong, deputy administrator of the State Forest Administration and a national CPPCC member, has asked for the forestry industry to be included as a target of Chinese foreign aid, asserting that it can contribute to China's national image and its public diplomacy.

Meanwhile, government agencies facing criticism online have devoted themselves to using media reports to shape public opinion. On November 16, 2011, a kindergarten bus struck a truck head-on in the city of Qingyang in Gansu Province, killing 21. This resulted in an online backlash calling on the government to prioritize China's own development over foreign aid, and where it does provide aid, to do so within its fiscal means. In this context, Mei Xinyu, a researcher at the [Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation](#) in the Ministry of Commerce, argued that foreign aid serves as the "entry ticket" into other countries for Chinese corporations and that it gives China a bigger voice in the global community.



Premier Wen Jiabao giving a speech at the NPC (March 5, 2012; photo: Adrian Bradshaw/EPA/Jiji)

The Chinese government has made protecting Chinese citizens, corporations, and their interests overseas a top diplomatic priority following the kidnapping of Chinese citizens in Sudan and elsewhere and the large-scale repatriation of 30,000 of its citizens from Libya as that country fell into disorder. New proposals were advanced during the March 2012 sessions of the NPC and CPPCC in this connection. Han

Fanming, vice chairman of the Foreign

Affairs Committee of the CPPCC and researcher at the Center for Studies of World Modernization Process at Peking University, has called strongly on private-sector Chinese security companies to follow the example of major US private security firm Blackwater USA (renamed Xe Services in 2009 and Academi in 2011) in building an overseas presence. Both Ma Zonglin, head of the Power Construction Corporation of China and an NPC member, and Wan Jifei, chairman of the [China Council for the Promotion of International Trade](#) and a national CPPCC standing committee member, have called for the establishment of both a national warning system and improvements to China's legislative system.

While more than 10,000 proposals are made yearly in the NPC and CPPCC

combined, very few actually become policy. However, media reports on the proposals during the sessions do play an important role in shaping public opinion in defense of foreign policy.

Discussion Without Decision—China’s Rigid Foreign Policy

Chinese society is no longer monolithic, and a variety of voices are making themselves heard in foreign policy discussions. These include local governments, central government agencies, and scholars. Chinese policymaking is a world apart from what it was 20 years ago.

But under what remains an authoritarian regime, the policy guidelines of the central leadership continue to be the most significant factor in foreign policy. The uniquely Chinese structure of vague central policy guidelines and individual government agencies making routine policy decisions creates a diverse range of policies that are at times contradictory.

The emergence of interest groups makes balancing interests at the central level extremely difficult, and in many cases this results in “discussion without decision.” Given this, the government agencies and local governments that benefit from current foreign policy are naturally the ones working to maintain and promote it. The sixth plenary session of the Sixteenth CPC Central Committee in December 2006 first recognized the existence of special interest groups. These interest groups are fragmenting national policy while attempting to block structural changes to China’s growth model, and this phenomenon is not limited to domestic policy. The presence of vested interests is also leading to rigidity and paralysis in China’s foreign policy.

The Chinese government has maintained the existing foreign policy guidelines as it aims to avoid diplomatic friction, make its voice more heard in multinational affairs, and expand its influence by strengthening economic ties and cooperation. To be successful, it must put forth a clear policy vision founded on strong political decisions both at home and abroad, while properly balancing domestic interests. And there is also a need for political reform, including the improvement of transparency and introduction of checks and balances.

(Title background photo: Adrian Bradshaw/EPA/Jiji)

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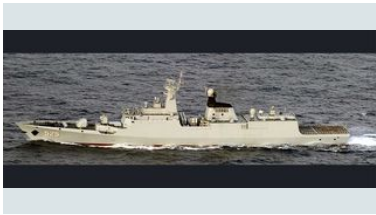
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