

Special Issue

How are Foreign Policy Decisions Made in China?

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Abstract

The growing number of actors involved in China's international activities has led to fractured authority in foreign policy decision-making. Actors vie for the attention of senior officials to promote their interests on any specific issue. As a result, decision making is often a slow process; there are multiple channels of information, and actors appeal to public opinion to support their claims. Since 2012, Xi Jinping has taken charge of all foreign policy related decision-making bodies in what appears to be an attempt to improve coordination of interest groups. A slight shift to a more personified foreign policy than during the Hu or Jiang eras has also taken place. In this paper, we describe how foreign policy decisions should be made in China according to formal rules; next, we take into account the reality of how the Chinese political system deals with China's evolving international role. We conclude by assessing the risks of fragmentation, on the one hand, and Xi's efforts to recentralise foreign policy, on the other hand.

Key words: Chinese foreign policy, Xi Jinping administration, foreign policy decision-making, Chinese foreign policy actors, Chinese political system, Chinese political fragmentation

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1. Introduction

China watchers continuously debate which factors determine how the Chinese government responds to international events. In this paper, our initial starting point is that China's responses to international events are moulded by China's decision-making system. We assume that foreign policy actors have their own bureaucratic interests, and they make calculations according to these interests. While this is a relatively common approach within international relations, it is not one often followed in studies of Chinese foreign policy.¹ We also take foreign policy to be as it is defined by the Chinese system itself; issues with transnational implications (such as climate change or monetary policy, to give two examples) are covered in this paper only when they are designated by the Chinese system as being 'foreign policy issues'.

To analyse how domestic interests shape foreign policy decisions, we must focus on how the Chinese system makes decisions. We first assess the formal decision-making system by focusing on the official rules, regulations, laws and decisions of the Communist Party of China ('CPC' or 'the Party') or the People's Republic of China ('PRC') to explain how China's political organisation should in theory influence China's international behaviour. We then analyse both the impact of numerous new foreign policy actors who have emerged

1. There are of course exceptions to this statement—most of the footnotes in this paper refer to these. Probably the most significant exception is the work of Zhou Qi, a Chinese academic married to a senior foreign affairs official, whose dissertation on the topic, written while her husband was posted in Washington DC, is the signal academic work. See references for Zhou Qi (2008).

as a result of China's changing global role and the informal norms of behaviour that have developed between these actors. We conclude by assessing trends in foreign policy decision making under Xi Jinping's leadership.

We draw on an extensive body of interviews, case studies, workshops, dialogues, research of Chinese-language and English-language sources and relationship mapping to shed light on how various actors influence China's international behaviour. This method is based on a number of previous works separately written by the authors.

1.1. China's Formal Security Policy Decision-Making Structure

We begin with the assumption that domestic political considerations can influence foreign policy decisions.² There are some analytic advantages in placing the foreign and security decision-making areas in a domestic context. The formal rank and authority of different bodies within Chinese domestic politics are relatively well established. Rank consciousness dictates the way that officials and their agencies interact with each other.

Almost all members of the bodies charged with implementing any policy are first and foremost members of the CPC. The Party's power is paramount. The Party's highest body ranks higher than the highest State body's rank; the Party outranks all sectors of the State, including government departments; the Party controls the use of force through the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which is an armed wing of the Party rather than a conventional state army, and the Party controls the consultative mechanisms of the state, which are designed to reflect popular opinion.

Within the formal Party decision-making system, implementation is meant to occur in a

structured way. Orders are passed down from level to level. While an individual can make a decision to do something, he/she must have recourse to an order from a higher level allowing him or her to act.

The Party's 87 million-odd members officially communicate according to a structured system governing contact throughout different levels of the Party hierarchy. Each political level must coordinate the different interests and agencies involved in a given order from above. Each level can then issue its own orders downwards to the next level. There are different types of orders, and each type of order has a different level of authority. The rank of the body that issues the order affects the authority of the order. This system of authority is outlined in an array of official documents that outline the different ranks and classes of positions in the Chinese system.³ These rules shape how different actors and interests compete for policy influence. The following section will outline the bodies responsible for setting these rules and making the most authoritative foreign policy orders.

1.2. The Rule-Makers

The Communist Party of China and the Government of the People's Republic of China have separate decision-making structures although some entities overlap in function, authority and even personnel. Therefore, within the formal Chinese political system, decisions are made along dual tracks: the Party track and the State track. From the point of view of understanding how the political system works, there are three major coordination bodies of interest: one within the Party and two within the State.

The CPC Central Committee is the leading Party coordination body. Because the Party

2. As Gourevitch argues, 'The international system is underdetermining. . . . The environment may exert strong pulls, but short of actual occupation, some leeway in response to that environment remains. The explanation of choice among the possibilities therefore requires some examination of domestic politics.' Peter Gourevitch (1978). The second image reversed: the international sources of domestic politics. *International Organization*, 32, p. 900.

3. Party rank is outlined in The Secretariat Bureau of the State Council General Office (1998) *Zhongyang zhengfu zuzhi jigou* (The Apparatus of the Chinese Central Government), Gaige chubanshe: Beijing; state rank is available through various state websites and portals. See also Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin (2013), *Understanding China's Political System*, Congressional Research Service: Washington DC.

reigns supreme, the Central Committee is also the most important body in the Chinese system. The Central Committee's 205 members are assigned to the most important positions in the Chinese government and represent China's most powerful 195 men and ten women.

The second major coordination body is the State Council to which the Central Committee has bestowed the day-to-day administration of the country. The State Council—China's 'cabinet'—is headed by a state premier, who plays a role similar to that of a prime minister, and who, with a number of vice-premiers and councillors, oversees a government system. The State Council controls a wide array of central bodies of lower rank, including commissions, ministries, administration bodies and central organisations (such as hospitals or state-owned enterprises).

The third noteworthy coordination body, though less important than the Central Committee or the State Council, is the National People's Congress. The National People's Congress is a parliament-like entity that in principle oversees the State Council. In reality, its power is limited although in recent years it has become noteworthy as a body that permits a relatively free discussion of important legislation under consideration.

Because each of these major coordination bodies meets rarely, usually annually, they delegate their decision-making powers to executive sub-committees who meet more regularly. The overwhelmingly most important decision-making body is the CPC Politburo Standing Committee, whose seven members derive from the 25-member Politburo, who in turn are the most powerful members of the Central Committee.

While these major coordination bodies meet in full but rarely, they matter enormously for two reasons. First, the decisions made by their respective smaller executive groups determine how the country actually is governed. Second, the full bodies determine the rank of different individuals, and thus the degree of importance of different interests within the Chinese system. The importance of an issue often can be gauged on the basis of the rank of the person responsible for it. The roles of individuals

change according to the position that the Party places them in, and both individuals and roles are rotated regularly. Individuals generally derive their rank—and their clout—*ex officio*. So one's rank within the system as an individual is not only the measure of one's position in the system, but also a powerful indication of the power one's organisation or interest area holds within the system. For example, when Xi Jinping travels overseas, people who are from a Western political system's perspective appear to be advisors (such as Li Zhanshu and Wang Huning) rank more highly and are treated according to protocol in a more senior manner than the highest ranked foreign affairs professional, the State Councillor in charge of foreign affairs (Yang Jiechi) or the Foreign Minister (Wang Yi). Li, who heads the General Office of the CPC, and Wang Huning, who heads the CPC Research Office and is also a Politburo member, have greater status, rank and power in the Chinese system than Yang or Wang Yi because of their higher Party rank.

1.3. Major Bodies in the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Structure

The ultimate decision-making body on crucial foreign policy issues (and any other issue of utmost relevance) is the executive committee of the Central Committee, called the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The PSC oversees consequential decisions affecting China's major relationships, including the United States, Japan, Russia and North Korea. The PSC also has to deal with emergencies or international crises, such as border skirmishes or international incidents. While one assumes that there are a number of so-called 'point men' on the PSC covering various strategic issues—Wang Qishan on Sino-US relations, Li Keqiang on the European Union and Zhang Dejiang on North Korea for example—with the exception of PSC chair Xi Jinping, none of the other members have specific foreign policy responsibilities.

Shifts or changes in policy and long-term decisions that demand lengthier and possibly numerous discussions can be taken up in the Politburo. Additionally, the Politburo has

regular ‘study sessions’; these serve as a platform for the leadership to promote new policies or directions. These study sessions are meticulously orchestrated. The topics of the sessions are then publicised widely. The current Politburo has held 22 study sessions since late 2012, five of which have had international relevance. (People.cn 2015)

All significant changes in direction of strategic policy, or of the rules governing policy creation, are to be officially endorsed by the Central Committee. But it only meets once a year. So matters are more likely to be discussed in the PSC (or Politburo), who are presumed to meet roughly weekly and fortnightly, respectively (Cabestan 2009). Decision making remains secretive in China, especially at the pinnacle of power; for example, the meeting dates and the agendas of the PSC are very rarely made public.

Some analysts argue that the Politburo and Central Committee shun challenging a consensus already reached by the PSC. The closed door, consensus-based nature of Chinese decision making, makes the veracity of this statement difficult to test. But actors within the PSC and Politburo certainly have some unofficial veto powers. Constitutionally, and in practise, China follows the process of ‘collective leadership’, and so, in theory and presumably in practise too; major decisions can be vetoed should a coalition be formed that is strong enough to overturn any dissent from others.

Further complicating any attempt to understand the Chinese decision-making system is the existence of ‘Leading Small Groups’ (LSGs) (中央领导小组 *zhongyang lingdao xiaozu*) or committees to advise the leaders on how they should proceed on any given issue of interest. The most important LSGs are attached to the Central Committee, and through that, report to the PSC.

Leading Small Groups can be established to look into any issue—there were leading small groups for the 2008 Olympic Games for example—and they function both as coordination mechanisms for different state and Party interests, and as bodies to implement central directives. The LSGs rank is usually dependent on the rank of the body that established the LSG,

and on the rank of the most senior member of the LSG. Again, rank is determined by the individual. So the more powerful the head of the LSG, the more powerful the LSG is seen to be, and the more able it is to prosecute its coordinated interest within the Chinese system. Foreign policy has powerful LSGs compared with other groups within the system as foreign policy LSGs are headed by the General Secretary (Xi Jinping).

1.4. The Warring Entities

Historically, the military establishment has been an important interest group in the Chinese political system, and it continues to wield substantial clout. Whether the military would like to have a greater role in foreign policy, decision making is not the focus of this article. However, what is important to note is that the Party leadership upholds a decision-making system that keeps the military at arm’s length from political decision making. The military has a completely different governance structure than other areas of the Chinese state. This provides it with a good deal of autonomy over its own professional and operational activities. At times, this autonomy can itself influence foreign policy. An example can be seen in the 2007 anti-satellite missile test, which was conducted by the military without a coordinated Chinese position being agreed upon in advance with the civilian establishment. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was not able to verify the test or provide any comment until more than a week later.

The military does not necessarily strive to influence foreign policy decision making. Many depend on the issue at hand, and whether the issue is related to national security. If we judge the role of the PLA solely based on the rank and position of the individuals who are members of the LSGs, PLA members are often included to relay information, either between the military and civilian foreign policy establishments or within the PLA. For example, one of the *ex officio* military members of the foreign policy-related LSGs is usually an expert in dealing with the outside world from a military perspective.

As its international commitments have grown, the Chinese system has increasingly had to put more effort into shaping its public image. Indeed, propaganda bodies play a central role in Chinese foreign policy. All of the major LSGs dealing with foreign or security decisions have a representative (or two) from the propaganda organs of the Party. These representatives tend to outrank the members of the foreign policy establishment within the LSGs.

The importance attached to propaganda in the Chinese political system is intertwined with the CPC's challenge in dealing with a transforming international environment in which China is active. These difficulties will be examined more in the following section. But it is important to note here that the Chinese system strives to solicit the skills it needs to undertake its international commitments with the entities that are already in place. This need to 'retrofit old organisations' for new tasks can be seen clearly in foreign affairs. For example, in the foreign affairs arena, there are at least three basic bureaux that are each responsible for elements of foreign policy.

The first is the Party's own International Department (CPC ID), formerly the International Liaison Department. Initially, this department solely managed relations with overseas communist and socialist parties. However, with the opening and reform of China in the 1970s and 1980s, the CPC ID's role changed. Today, it manages links to foreign political parties and movements. The CPC ID is instrumental on decisions pertaining to China's relations with North Korea, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The major state bodies are the MFA, and the Taiwan Affairs Office. The MFA is responsible for government-to-government relations with other states around the world. It fulfils the usual role of a foreign ministry in a government, with the caveat that the dominant position of the Party at the expense of the Chinese State makes the MFA weaker than in most nations. The Taiwan Affairs Office is in charge of preparing policy, negotiations and agreements with what Mainland China calls the 'Taiwan authorities'.

Despite these three bodies that all work on foreign affairs, new issues regularly arise in

international events that appear to fall between the cracks of China's existing foreign affairs system. In the case of these new issues arising, new bodies can be formed that combine different interests in foreign affairs. An example is the State Oceanic Administration, restructured in 2013. This second-tier entity, under the Ministry of Land and Resources, focuses on China's maritime environment. Since 2013, it has also been administratively in charge of a consolidated Chinese Coast Guard though the Ministry of Public Security appears to have the upper hand in operational control (Jakobson 2014, pp. 16–18). The relationship between this State Oceanic Administration, the Ministry of Public Security and the foreign policy system remains unclear.

As China's international activities have increased, nearly every ministry in the Chinese system has developed interests in foreign affairs in some way. For example, a recent report by one of the authors noted the following interests in maritime affairs *alone*: the Ministry of Public Security; the Ministry of Defence; the Fishing Administration under the Ministry of Agriculture; the State Oceanic Administration under the Ministry of Land and Resources; the Maritime Safety Administration under the Ministry of Transport; the Ministry of Environmental Protection; General Administration of Customs; the Ministry of Science and Technology; the National Tourism Association; the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology; and, senior to them all, the National Development and Reform Commission that is responsible for economic development generally and resources in particular. To that could also be added the Ministry of State Security and the State Asset and Supervision Administration Commission, which oversees the major state-owned enterprises, including the oil firms.

1.5. Old System, New World: Problems of Chinese Foreign Policy Making

Within this plethora of different actors and interests lies the heart of problems with China's foreign policy decision making. Nominally, each agency understands that its work

represents only a fraction of China's broad national interests, but when it comes to creating policy, each agency sees itself as the only (or the most important) representative of the whole picture.

All foreign policy actors claim to operate in the name of China's national interests—and thus almost all actions can be justified. The Ministry of Commerce promotes China's prosperity; the People's Liberation Army defends China's sovereignty; the oil companies ensure China's energy security; local governments raise living standards; netizens uphold China's dignity, and so on. When this is combined with the natural bureaucratic instinct of ensuring sufficient resources for one's department, confluences of interest can emerge. For example, the PLA is prone to exaggerate the tensions over maritime interests to ensure sufficient funding for new vessels and aircraft; and in doing so, it is likely to find a natural ally in the one or more of the national oil companies aspiring to explore resources in contested waters.

Many of the actors within the foreign policy system hold similar ranks, which mean they cannot issue orders to each other.⁴ So while the MFA can make its own rules and expect all MFA staff to follow these rules, that has no impact on any other ministry—who are able to make their own rules. Only an order from above, from a higher-ranking body, can override a decision. Consequently, many actors in the Chinese foreign policy system compete for the favour of higher-ranking bodies. In the case of major issues with regard to foreign affairs, that often means competing for the favour of the Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping.

This competition can be vicious. Other analysts have described the wide array of commissions, ministries and state administrative and

regulatory bodies under the State Council as 'a fractious, highly competitive group of institutions with sometimes overlapping jurisdiction' (Lawrence 2013, p. 30).

Foreign affairs are not immune to this infighting. Indeed, the fact that so many different types of actors are able to influence foreign policy may actually exacerbate the problem. These actors include senior CPC officials who hold no government position, senior officials in ministries, agencies and provincial governments, senior officers in various PLA units and CEOs of large state-owned resource companies. Five provincial leaders are Politburo members and outrank all senior Chinese government foreign affairs officials. People with regular personal access to the Party General Secretary or his aides—senior military leaders, CEOs of large state-owned enterprises, academics or even personal friends—can all seek to have their voices heard. And this is but a shortlist of what is an ever-growing group of actors; indeed, provincial leaders, fishermen, tourist agencies and dumpling factories have all had an impact on China's foreign policy over the past decade.

These internal politics are complicated by the lack of status accorded to the State Councillor on Foreign Policy (currently Yang Jiechi). As a State Councillor, Yang may be the highest foreign policy professional, but he is outranked in general Party status by at least 30 other people and is at the same rank as around 20 other people.

Interestingly, the rank and status given to foreign policy professionals have *diminished* as China's foreign policy obligations have grown. State Councillors in charge of foreign policy are today unlikely to be able to ensure that senior decision makers heed their advice in internal disputes over policy direction. Yang is more likely to be able to gain sway through his role as the head of the Foreign Affairs Office, which is responsible for managing the affairs of the Foreign Affairs and National Security Leading Small Groups. The responsibilities of the Foreign Affairs Office, which include drafting meeting agendas and controlling the flow of documents to senior leaders, may provide Yang with greater bureaucratic power

4. For example, the five so-called super-ministries, formed out of a 2008 administrative reform, although some argue that the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology was the only true winner from this reform. Another example can be seen in the creation of the Ministry of the Environment out of the former State Environmental Planning Agency, with the new ministry going up a rank. In a less positive vein (for him, anyway), see the role of Chen Deming as Minister of Trade but only an alternate member of the 17th Central Committee.

than if he was only a State Councillor. However, even given Yang's ability to set the agenda of foreign policy discussions, his role in decision making is likely to be limited. Foreign affairs professionals appear to be placed within senior decision-making bodies largely to provide information and, following a decision, manage policy implementation (Jakobson & Knox 2010, p. 8).⁵

There are myriad competing bodies feeding information into the Chinese foreign policy decision-making system. Each agency involved in national security and foreign policy provides regular reports that reflect concerns specific to that agency's work focus. For example, the General Office of the Central Committee prepares a daily summary for leaders on major issues and intelligence information. The watch centre of the General Staff Department of the PLA delivers a daily intelligence summary and a report on the threat environment to the Politburo and the Central Military Commission. The government's public media arm, Xinhua News Agency, produces daily reports and a number of 'Reference Materials', both public and private (Qi 2008). The Foreign Ministry's diplomatic posts send through reports and cables.

All of this information can be used by foreign affairs professionals to brief senior leaders. Urgent or important issues (as decreed from earlier) involve a process of delegation and briefing before a discussion is made. Often this is done through the State Councillor for Foreign Affairs, who can order his office (the Foreign Affairs Office) to summon research reports, analyses, opinions and data from relevant government agencies, think tanks and academia. The State Councillor is then briefed, and then the State Councillor or his delegate briefs the senior leader.

This collation of information can be highly ineffective. The National Security LSG, for example, is presumed to have been set up because the Foreign Affairs LSG was seen as being not proactive enough during the 1999 bombing of

the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Yet both of these LSGs have the same office (the Foreign Affairs Office), have the same secretary (the State Councillor for Foreign Affairs) and have the same staff writing briefings and managing documentation.⁶ It is hard to imagine that the briefings and information provided to either leading small group is substantially different or that one group would be any quicker in reacting to events.

This inefficient process of internal information provision creates complications in how China's foreign policy system deals with the outside world. The time it takes to provide information through 'authoritative' processes, time magnified by the many actors involved in China's foreign policy, allows other actors space and time to attempt to influence policy through public opinion and informal channels. China's media is far livelier and in some respects open to outsiders' commentary than when China's foreign policy decision-making bodies were established. Public commentators, including a number of uniformed senior military officers, publish comments in print media, television or in online forums. Most commentators have the explicit permission of their superiors to provide media commentary or submit opinion pieces. A person who has a personal connection to a senior leader—in some cases through a family member—can weigh in with a stance on foreign policy events, while the senior leaders are waiting for the system to provide them with information on the events.

Opinions and information published by Chinese official media undoubtedly influence the prism through which many people view China's foreign policy. For example, a few military officers regularly express uncompromising views about China's territorial claims in the Chinese media. While these officers may or may not have sought permission to speak out, they clearly believe that their sentiments are shared by their superior officers and that they will not be punished for speaking out. And these officers' hawkish views in turn tend to spur on media commentators and

5. See also A. Doak Barnett (1985), *The Making of Foreign Policy in China: Structure and Process*. Westview Press: Boulder CO, p. 45

6. Known usually as being 'one office, two signs' or 'hanging out two shingles' (*gua liang ge paizi*).

'netizens' (citizens using online media) who insist on China being 'strong'. So the military officers—who nearly without exception have no operational experience as uniformed officers but are PLA propaganda specialists—make inflammatory statements, stimulate further commentary calling for China to be 'strong' and then claim to have 'public opinion on their side' in a way that foreign affairs professionals cannot.

Other systems of government balance multiple competing voices by establishing guidelines on how competing opinions should be resolved (elections) and documents (such as constitutions) that provide a framework to help different actors know what to prioritise and what to ignore. This is very difficult in the Chinese foreign policy system. There is no guidance within the Chinese Constitution as to how different foreign policy actors should interact with each other, or to what the goals of China's foreign policy should be. China has almost no legislation binding the actions of national security decision makers.

Another method of balancing competing voices is to rely on official pronouncements to shape the behaviour of actors. Thus, when the delegation of power is unclear among similarly ranked entities (as described earlier), various actors can look to official statements for guidance. China has not made such official statements in most areas of foreign policy. The foreign policy process has been described as 'unclear, un-institutionalized and unregulated' (Sun 2011).

Because there are no definitive guidelines or rules guiding the behaviour of actors in the foreign policy sector, actors often use informal channels to promote their interests. Much depends on the issue at hand. For example, maritime security actors involved in the South China Sea are said to have greater freedom than those involved in the East China Sea because senior leaders are more attentive to relations with Japan than to smaller Southeast Asian nations.

This somewhat obscure information environment does not necessarily mean that foreign policy is unimportant. Rather, it is a reflection of foreign policy being traditionally seen as

the domain of the Party General Secretary—and the problems highlighted earlier can only be resolved with the General Secretary's imprimatur. In the final part of this article, we turn to examine the role of current General Secretary Xi Jinping.

1.6. *The Ultimate Decision-Maker: Xi Jinping*

Xi Jinping is the ultimate decision maker on foreign policy issues. This leadership role began before Xi ascended to the very top of China's power hierarchy in November 2012. Already in mid-2012, he was reportedly put in charge of a new senior leaders group tasked to focus on maritime security—the Protection of Maritime Interests LSG. In September 2012, Xi was reportedly also made head of an 'Office to Respond to the Diaoyu Crisis' (Jakobson 2013). On becoming General Secretary, Xi took the chair of most of the influential LSGs, including on Taiwan affairs, foreign affairs and national security. Xi also heads the new State Security Committee announced in October 2013 (Li & Yanzhou 2015).

Not only has Xi Jinping amassed more formal power than either of his two predecessors, Hu Jintao (2002–2012) and Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), but Xi also appears to have taken a strong personal interest in foreign policy issues. Such a personification of policy has been rare in the Chinese system after Deng Xiaoping retreated into retirement some 25 or so years ago. In essence, Xi is now the sole coordinator of Chinese foreign and security policy.

By personifying foreign policy decision making, Xi is taking a risk. In the event of missteps, he will likely be held accountable by his fellow PSC members, and possibly by the political establishment more broadly. Public opinion, while at present clearly favourable to Xi Jinping, could also turn against him. Moreover, the top-down nature of the Chinese system means that Xi does not have any other person or group as a check on his power. By moving further from 'collective leadership' when it comes to foreign policy decision making, Xi is minimising the opportunities for his decisions to be modified.

One should not, however, on the basis of a few years of Xi's leadership, exaggerate the extent to which Xi's more forthright style, and formal power has changed decision making in foreign policy more generally. Reaching a consensus—or at a minimum, the perception of consensus—among the senior CPC leaders continues to be extremely important for the maintenance of political unity and stability. Furthermore, the PSC Chair has been and still is the final authority on major foreign policy decisions. Even during the Hu Jintao era, when collective leadership was emphasised more than now, Hu was the ultimate decision maker on important issues. For example, after North Korea conducted a nuclear test in 2006, Hu was said to have been compelled to personally edit the wording of China's official reaction because no one else wanted to take responsibility for such a sensitive issue (Jakobson & Knox 2010, p. 5).

Moreover, Xi has continued in his predecessors' footsteps by mostly resorting to vague language when formulating guidelines. In autocratic systems, vague statements are especially important for senior leaders as they provide room for manoeuvre. Vagueness keeps the bureaucracies and various constituencies competing for benediction and allows the leader to avoid being held accountable for any policy missteps.⁷

For example, Xi has insisted on ambiguous formulations on the issue of what measures China should adopt to defend its (perceived) sovereignty over disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. Tensions with neighbours over maritime rights have increased under Xi's leadership, markedly complicating China's foreign policy objectives in the region. According to an official involved in the preparation of meetings of the LSG on maritime affairs, at one point Xi made it clear that he favoured 'a determined response' to provocations to China's sovereignty and maritime interests while taking care to stress that 'doing more' should not endanger stability (Jakobson 2014, p. 29). But Xi did not articulate *how*

China should show a determined response, nor how China should do more without endangering stability. Consequently, agencies that wish to 'stand up for China's rights more actively'—actors who do not include the MFA—state that they are 'greatly strengthened by Xi's leadership'. But other actors can counterclaim that their actions are better suited to 'not endangering stability'.

One can presume that Xi's decision to take charge of all of these different small groups and offices at least in part reflects an acknowledgement that China needs to better coordinate its foreign policy decision making to ensure that implementation of agreed-upon policies is more consistent.

Whether or not Xi can possibly manage to keep all these bureaucratic reins in his hands is an open question. Can one human being be responsible for so much and still operate effectively?

Xi's ability to weigh up costs and benefits is hindered by the same problems with regard to information, which were discussed in the previous section. An objective assessment of the consequences of any given foreign policy decision may not always be the highest priority for the many actors competing for Xi's limited attention. According to an analyst at a prominent Chinese think tank, 'I am a producer of information. The senior leaders are my customers, and their written comments/instructions are the purpose of my existence.' (Sun 2011) Analysts who think it is their task to try to persuade Xi are likely to factor in what they think of Xi's own interpretation and interests. Xi has already been stung by a lack of independent analysis, being caught off guard by the failure of his own Taiwan analysts to accurately predict the results of local elections in Taiwan (Hornby 2015).

In sum, by taking personal command of all of the foreign policy bodies, Xi needs to also personally arbitrate the many conflicting interests within the system. But Xi is unlikely to untangle the confused policy making structure that exacerbates these conflicting interests, as that would create bureaucratic losers. Yet in personifying foreign policy, Xi faces the dilemma that any decision he makes will be used

7. See for example Gordon Tullock (1987) *Autocracy*. Kluwers Academic Publishers: Amsterdam, p. 20.

by actors throughout the system to justify their own implementation of the decision. While Xi may take the credit for any successes, he may also have to take the blame for any failures. And, finally, Xi has to juggle all these interests while accepting that he will have conflicting sources of information on any decision.

Xi appears conscious of walking this fine line. While he has made far more foreign policy speeches and pronouncements than previous leaders, he has stuck thus far to motherhood statements, classical aphorisms and modern euphemisms in a way that assuages any public doubt while still avoiding the creation of bureaucratic losers (Zou). The wording of China's foreign policy objectives, currently expressed in Xi's speeches as the building of a community of 'common destiny' with 'one belt and one road' and a focus on China's 'periphery', are in a fine tradition of rhetoric that is sufficiently lacking in specificity that it is possible for actors to justify many different kinds of action.

Xi presumably would prefer to keep treading this fine line. However, he might be forced to make hard decisions and express himself more explicitly sooner than he would like because of external events in the Asia-Pacific region.

There are also implications for international actors who need to interact with Xi and the Chinese foreign policy apparatus. Rather than being able to assume that China can be described solely as a 'rising power' (and thus confining internal concerns to what structural realists traditionally term the 'black box' of internal politics),⁸ our analysis makes clear that dealing with China's foreign policy requires dealing with a number of actors who each have different interests. There is a possibility that decisions that weaken international security are a byproduct of these competing interests, rather than as a byproduct of a ill-defined Chinese 'grand strategy', if one exists at all. Similarly, it is likely that Chinese behaviour will be more easily influenced through targeting Chinese

8. Most famously by Kenneth Waltz, although examples can be seen throughout the work of other structural realists such as John Mearsheimer.

internal actors with similar interests, rather than seeking to influence a nebulous Chinese grand strategy.

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