

OVERSTRETCH? CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY GAMBLE

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INTRODUCTION

FRANÇOIS GODEMENT

The packaging and selling of China's foreign policy and diplomacy has become a hard task, even for China-based experts who try not to depart too much from the Party-state's scripts.

The examples glimpsed for the three articles in this issue of China Trends cover only a few of the issues and conflicts that Xi Jinping's "new era" has brought to the fore. Discourse management – an issue that is often divorced from reality – the explanations now used for the South China Sea, and the reasons for the deviation from normal diplomatic behavior by several envoys in the past year – are considered here. But other issues could be added: China's stepped up naval and air actions around Taiwan (which of course

is NOT considered an act of foreign policy for China), ever more persistent action in the area of the Senkaku islands, and a violent border confrontation with India around irredentist Chinese claims.

In a broader view of things, **China's rising military strength has so far not led to out of the region confrontations.** China has even restrained its "showing the flag" actions around Europe since the 2017 circumnavigation of our continent, and it concentrates on commercial penetration, technology acquisition and discourse management. Yet even there a grey zone has appeared, with more and more high-profile cyber actions, manipulation of information through social media, including bots. International organizations would seem to be an ideal ground for increased influence from China, since the Trump temptation to withdraw dismays its partners. Our Chinese experts in fact cite this opportunity. **But one should never try to second guess what China's leaders – currently, Xi Jinping – consider to be their own interest.** The reality is that China has not made any openings to reforms in these international organizations, even when increased inefficiency or irrelevance threaten their future. Europeans would have liked nothing more than an updated WTO, or a WHO with more enforcement capacity of its (in principle) mandatory guidance. They would also have liked nothing better than progress in emissions and climate mitigation agreements.

The reality is that China has not made any openings to reforms in these international organizations, even when increased inefficiency or irrelevance threaten their future.

Instead, China moved on Hong Kong: nobody should have been surprised, since China's behavior in autonomous regions such as Tibet, and especially Xinjiang, has been far worse than any action so far regarding Hong Kong. But the status of Hong Kong until 2047 is governed by an international treaty signed with the UK in 1984: breaching it openly, as is the case with the 2020 National Security Law, is an international act that **puts into question China's respect for its own legal commitments.**

It is with this background in mind that the following three articles should be read. They show a **defensive trend among China's experts.** Some of the best-known speakers on the Beijing international relations circuit do warn, in fact, about an overstretch: angering many partners at the same time, weaponizing mask diplomacy, and more importantly **underestimating America's real strategic capacity in the Western Pacific** are mentioned.

But there is also much rationalization of China's new diplomatic behavior, and also a shift to focus almost exclusively on the United States as the cause of all ills. In the first category, although the term wolf warrior is denied¹, it is acknowledged **that wolves exist in the world, and China needs to put up a response to the many attacks it suffers from the West.** The second aspect represents a recent shift in China's diplomatic discourse. Although there have been very hostile expressions since the start of the China-US trade conflict in 2017, Chinese ambassadors abroad have shifted (in France, Poland and Sweden) from general aggressive tactics to a narrower focus on denouncing the United States. Beijing had remained very careful of personality attacks. It has now repeatedly attacked US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and a recent speech by China's Foreign affairs Wang Yi on US-China relations mentions American "whims", likely a veiled reference to the US president. At the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations and as troops were deployed around the White House, China's official media abandoned all remaining restraint and began ridiculing Washington.

¹ It is actually derived from the 2004 Wolf Totem novel (狼图腾 or Lang Tuteng), a struggle for life tale set in Inner Mongolia which argues that the Chinese behave too much like sheep in front of wolves.

Although there have been very hostile expressions since the start of the China-US trade conflict in 2017, 2020 marks an intensification and a personalization of polemics with the United States.

This new focus finds more consensus among experts, who follow the indictment of the US but suggest moderate lines of response. In the case of the South China Sea, this means an **accent on economic diplomacy, rescue at sea, and a disproportionate optimism regarding the current round of negotiations of the Code of Conduct with ASEAN**. The essential issue – China's refusal to acknowledge international arbitration, its take-over and expansion of atolls and their militarization, is conveniently tucked away. It is US freedom of navigation exercises which are the destabilizing factor to the *status quo*: never mind that this *status quo* was established by force in the last decade...

Is this all-out focus on the United States a strategic shift, or just a convenient waiting exercise in a US election year, when the Trump administration has also made some high profile moves on China? It is hard to discern at present. What is clear is that the older generation of Chinese experts is actually more comfortable with traditional Cold War rhetoric than with the Cultural Revolution echo of wolf warrior diplomacy.

ABOUT

China Trends seeks understanding of China from Chinese language sources. In an era where the international news cycle is often about China, having a reality check on Chinese expressions often provides for more in-depth analysis of the logic at work in policies, and needed information about policy debates where they exist. China Trends is a quarterly publication by Institut Montaigne's Asia program, with each issue focusing on a single theme.



SEARCHING FOR CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE POWER

The tumult of 2020, from the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the dualistic international perception of China. It has been at once the source of the virus and the largest provider of relief aid. In response, China's scholar-officials have sought to understand why China's accomplishments and contributions to the international community in general have not helped its long-standing quest to acquire "international discourse power" (国际话语权), also translated as "international right to speak", an issue that CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping placed a focus on beginning with his 2016 participation in a Party news and public opinion work conference² **While some blame China's struggle on Western efforts to keep China down, others emphasize the need to increase China's credibility.** These experts also explain that by increasing its international discourse power, China can take control of

To counter this, argues Sun Jisheng, China must "participate in the formulation of governance rules, the setting of governance agendas, and the creation of governance institutions".

the international agenda. This is equated with the belief that currently, China is subjected to a different moral standard than other major powers; the current widespread concern about the rise of China would be less a consequence of controversial Chinese state behavior, such as the persecution of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, than a manifestation of the continuing dominance of Western discourse power. To counter this, argues Sun Jisheng, Vice President of China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), China must "participate in the formulation of governance rules, the setting of governance agendas, and the creation of governance institutions". These will directly affect the future global governance order, and ultimately China's international status³ **Many believe that an intensifying trend of American withdrawal from international organizations provides China with a strategic opportunity to take control of the international agenda.**

Indigenizing Discourse Power

Recent publications also argue that, well beyond the scope of China's response to Covid-19, the accomplishments of the Chinese state – such as the ongoing poverty alleviation campaign, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and China's status as the world's second-largest economy – have not gained commensurate respect for China. For Sun Jisheng, one of the most important reasons behind this is that **"China stories are being told by foreigners, who discredit and distort China's role, popularizing China threat theory and China hardline theory".**⁴ Sun Jisheng's complaint is echoed by Zhang Zhanbin, Director of the School of Marxism Studies at the National Academy of Governance. Zhang asserts that "there are some Western countries who actively look to give China a bad name, forcing us (China) into a position of firefighting."⁵



JOHAN VAN DE VEN

Johan van de Ven is a Senior Analyst at RWR Advisory Group, a Washington, D.C.-based consultancy that advises government and private-sector clients on geopolitical risks associated with China and Russia's international economic activity. He leads RWR's research and analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative, the centerpiece of foreign policy under Xi Jinping.

2. Xinhua, "Grasp International Discourse Power, Effectively Broadcast China's Voice – A Theoretical Discussion of Xi Jinping's Thinking on Overseas Propaganda (把握国际话语权 有效传播中国声音——习近平外宣工作思路理念探析)", Xinhuanet.com, 6 April 2016.

3. Sun Jisheng "Theory, Mechanisms, Strength: Revisiting the Strengthening of Chinese Diplomacy Research (理论、机制、能力：加强中国外交研究的思考)", Pacific Journal, 2 June 2020.

4. Sun Jisheng, "Revisiting Chinese Diplomacy and International Discourse Power (中国外交与国际话语权提升的再思考)", Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism, 27 May 2020.

5. Zhang Zhanbin, "Turning China's Development Superiority into a Discourse Power Advantage (把中国的发展优势转化为国际话语优势)", Study Times, 25 May 2020.

Rather than asking why these views are so negative, there is a consensus that such theories are propagated explicitly in order to keep China down. Li Qiang, Dean of the School of International Relations at Tianjin Foreign Studies University, is particularly direct about this: "in order to prevent China from enhancing its discourse power, the United States has relied on discourse hegemony to suppress and obstruct China in various sectors."⁶ Therefore, as Zhang puts it, the goal is to "thoroughly reverse the dominance of Western discourse, and the portrayal of the West as strong and China as weak (彻底扭转“西话主导、西强我弱”的态势)".

6. Li Qiang, "China's International Discourse Power: Evolutionary Logic, Construction Dimensions, and Pragmatic Challenges (中国国际话语权：演进逻辑、构建维度与现实挑战)", Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism, No. 2, 2020.

Views are expressed on a range of measures to better communicate China's perspective. Zhang Zhanbin cites a need to **increase output of authoritative works on China's development path in foreign languages, while also increasing academic exchange and cooperation to train foreign experts on China issues.** He also suggests that China should "upgrade its theory and academic output in the communications field (提升对外交流的理论学术含量)". For Sun Jisheng, efforts must be taken to "develop a Chinese theory to explain Chinese practices, to avoid Chinese diplomatic practice being explained by Western international relations theory". Feng Shizheng and Wei Qingong, Researchers at National Academy of Development and Strategy of Renmin University, agree with these proposals, advocating for **"greater study of conditions in China, as well as the historical and practical foundations for China making the choices it has,"** in order to "solve the problem of China's development model and path receiving a scolding on the international stage".⁷ However, these ideas are not new to Chinese policy analysis, so it is unclear how they would improve China's ability to stand up to Western discourse power dominance. Instead, discourse power may be a function of circumstance, meaning that China's surest option may simply be to wait for moments of strategic opportunity, such as the poor handling of Covid19 by authorities in the United States.

Efforts must be taken to "develop a Chinese theory to explain Chinese practices, to avoid Chinese diplomatic practice being explained by Western international relations theory".

7. Feng Shizheng & Wei Qingong, "The Imagination, Localization, and Discourse Power of Chinese Sociology (中国社会学的想象力、本土化与话语权)", The Journal of Jiangsu Administration Institute, No. 5, 2019.

A Need to Build Influence

Given their political sensitivity, examples of controversial **Chinese state behavior are not discussed.** Some of our sources recognize that **China's development** successes and accumulation of hard power should not be presumed to generate international discourse power. Zuo Fengrong, Deputy Dean of the Institute for International Strategic Studies of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, and Liu Yong, Senior Researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, acknowledge that achieving international discourse power requires recognition and support from other countries.⁸ Li Qiang strikes a similar note, "compliance or violation of international moral principles can weaken or enhance the legitimacy of state power". Sun Jisheng is more guarded, and contends that China is poorly placed to build influence internationally when only 1% of United Nations secretariat staff are Chinese citizens.

8. Zuo Fengrong & Liu Yong, "How Developed Countries Seek Discourse Power (发达国家怎么谋求话语权)", Beijing Daily, 29 February 2020.

Proposals on ways to secure more influence vary widely. Li exhorts that "to construct moral discourse power, China must first occupy the commanding heights of morality." Zuo and Liu provide a suggestion of **the importance of developing a trustworthy media environment in their assessment that "the appearance of Western media as independent, free from political control,**

and objective is a major reason why they are seen as important by other countries", while offering the caveat that "actual circumstances may not be as they seem". Li Qiang advocates for China to build support by providing international public goods, an initiative that does seem to have gained traction during the Covid-19 pandemic, where China has emerged as the largest provider of material aid. China's increased efforts to provide public goods – with Covid-19 relief preceded by large-scale development lending under the Belt and Road Initiative – have nonetheless led to increased concern regarding the implications of China's rise for the liberal international order.

In keeping with her analysis, Sun Jisheng offers an institutional remedy, **arguing for a comprehensive overhaul of Chinese diplomatic training** (including language training and education in specific portfolios) as a way of improving the ability of Chinese diplomatic personnel to rise within international organizations. She also emphasizes that "with the widespread growth of

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social media platforms, how to deal with public diplomacy capabilities such as new media has also become a new ability that diplomats need to possess". Sun Jisheng's focus on social media shows an awareness that **China should seek to actively shape perceptions of itself, rather than passively allowing them to be formed**. However, the difficulty of this task is highlighted by the

widespread negative response to the aggressive social media engagements of Chinese diplomats within the context of "wolf warrior" diplomacy. As in the case of policy suggestions aimed at countering Western discourse hegemony, China's quest to win international influence may be best served by patiently waiting for moments of opportunity, rather than seeking to force the issue.

Explaining China on China's Terms, in China

Regardless of whether China's relative lack of international discourse power is attributed to the dominance of Western discourse power or to China's failure to win international influence, **proposals are unified by the implication that China should be explained on China's terms**. Ling Shengli takes this point literally, arguing for an expansion of China's practice of "home field diplomacy (主场外交)" (referring to the hosting of bilateral and multilateral summits in China).⁹ Indeed, Ling says that **"by conducting home field diplomacy, China can enhance its international voice, increase its participation and shaping of the international system, and optimize its own international image"**. "Home field diplomacy" is recognized as an official precept of the Chinese foreign policy establishment, having first been referenced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2014, with its roots ultimately traced back at least as far as the beginning of the Reform and Opening period. Since 2014, China has expended great effort and expense on strengthening its home field diplomacy, hosting multilateral fora such as the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Ling argues that through such events, China will "build a stage to sing on its own (搭台唱戏)".

However, there is already a large number of events taking place in China. The problem has less to do with building a platform for China to explain itself, and more to do with getting others to listen to China's side of the story. The regalia of events such as the Bo'ao Forum must be matched with a credible voice, a point that Sun and Zhang recognize indirectly, given their respective advocacy for enhanced diplomatic training and broadened international academic outreach.

⁹ Ling Shengli, "Home Field Diplomacy, Strategic Capacity, and Global Governance (主场外交、战略能力与全球治理)", *Foreign Affairs Review*, No. 4, 2019.

Setting the International Agenda

While many of the suggestions amount to doubling down on past practices, there is clarity about why China should seek to increase its international discourse power. Zuo Fengrong and Liu Yong argue that **greater discourse power will allow China “to set the agenda, establish rules and standards, and win the approval and acceptance of other countries.”** For Sun Jisheng, the ability to set the agenda will allow “China to put forward issues that matter to China.” By emphasizing China’s domestic successes and international contributions, and diverting attention away from controversial aspects of Chinese state behavior, it can secure more international support and leverage the international community towards its strategic interests. This would approximate the American approach to international discourse power in the post-war period. Zuo and Liu, as well as Sun Jisheng, assess that **the Trump Administration’s inclination to withdraw from international organizations and agreements offers a window for China to increase its international (and particularly institutional) discourse power.** According to Sun “after the US withdrawals, China has become the backbone” of a number of international organizations. Therefore, in pursuing international discourse power, it may be in the interests of Chinese authorities not to seek to reshape the international arena through initiatives such as “home field diplomacy”, and instead simply to wait for suitable geopolitical conditions to emerge. The contrast in the fortunes of China and the United States in fighting Covid-19 is just one example of how windows of opportunity for the advancement of China’s international discourse power can happen.

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GENERALLY STABLE? FACING US PUSHBACK IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Building militarized artificial features in the Spratly and seizing Scarborough Shoal are two major achievements of Xi Jinping during his first term in power, as emphasized in his work report to the 19th Party Congress. Under his leadership, **China has established a relative superiority vis-à-vis other claimants in the South China Sea in terms of military and law-enforcement presence.** This has greatly advanced the Chinese goal of progressively extending effective administrative control over the South China Sea. During Xi Jinping's second term, **even though there have been localized incidents and an overall increase of Chinese presence in the area, China has refrained from risky unilateral moves.** This is the result of several factors: a focus on consolidating recent gains, a priority placed on other areas of the confrontation with the United States, a more robust foreign naval presence in the South China Sea, Hong Kong and Taiwan taking precedence on the top of China's international agenda... This piece focuses on Chinese analyses of the unprecedented pushback China is facing from the United States.

The wedge between China and ASEAN

On July 13, the US State Department issued the US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea.¹⁰ The US document characterizes China's policy as

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treating the South China Sea as a "maritime empire". The new policy "aligns" the U.S. position on the PRC's maritime claims in the SCS with the 2016 decision of the Arbitral Tribunal.¹¹ In practice, this means that the nine-dash line can not be considered as a method to delimitate claims in the South China Sea, that the features in the Spratly covered by the arbitration award are not islands in a legal

sense and thus do not generate territorial waters or Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

Most commentators, like Chen Hanping, senior researcher at the Collaborative Innovation Center for South China Sea Studies at the University of Nanjing, see in the new American position an attempt to drive a wedge between China and ASEAN.¹² He notes a **correlation between the timing of the US decision and the fact that ASEAN has surpassed the EU to become China's first trading partner in the first quarter of 2020.** In general, the tone in Chinese commentaries aims at sending the message that the US tries to disrupt an otherwise increasingly harmonious relationship between China and ASEAN. Chen Hanping underlines that China has been ASEAN's main trading partner for 11 consecutive years, and argues that all Asian states should focus on cooperation against Covid-19.

Such rhetoric stressing the commonality of interests between China and ASEAN countries can also be found in an editorial in the Beijing Daily, which sternly



**MATHIEU
DUCHÂTEL**

Dr. Mathieu Duchâtel is Director of the Asia Program at Institut Montaigne since January 2019. Before joining the Institute he was Senior Policy Fellow and Deputy Director of the Asia and China Program at the European Council of Foreign Relations (2015-2018), Senior Researcher and the Representative in Beijing of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2011-2015), Research Fellow with Asia Centre in Paris (2007-2011) and Associate Researcher based in Taipei with Asia Centre (2004-2007).

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea." United States Department of State, 13 July 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹¹ Thomas Mensah, Jean-Pierre Cot, Stanislaw Pawlak, and Alfred Soons, "PCA Case No 2013-19 IN THE MATTER OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ARBITRATION -before - AN ARBITRAL TRIBUNAL", 2016. <https://docs.pca-cpa.org/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf>.

¹² Cheng Hanping, "Punch in the face! Some ASEAN countries' stance on South China Sea challenges Pompeo's statement (打脸！部分东盟国家的南海问题立场让蓬佩奥的声明相形见绌)", Collaborative Innovation Center for South China Sea Studies, 16 July 2020, <https://nanhai.nju.edu.cn/72/2f/c5320a487983/page.htm>.

accuses the US of attempting to undermine a relationship described as “stable” between China and ASEAN, at a moment of renewed focus on the negotiation of a Code of Conduct.¹³ The editorial has high praises for the current second round of negotiations of the draft text because it shows the “determination of all parties” to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.

This emphasis on the diplomatic process is slightly misleading because the adoption of the Single Draft of the South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text in August 2018 has revealed **one of the main negotiation goals from a Chinese perspective: to convince ASEAN to create a system of prior authorization to regulate access to the South China Sea for foreign navies.** China added to the single draft the point that “The Parties shall not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the

parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection” in the 2018 single draft.¹⁴ Such an outcome would be **inconsistent with freedom of navigation under UNCLOS.** It is unlikely that China’s rival claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines would sign up to a system that significantly undermines US extended

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deterrence. The Chinese goal is thus highly divisive within ASEAN. But most Chinese commentators remain upbeat in the Chinese media, perhaps in an attempt to lead public opinion.

Besides this characterization of the US strategic intention, there is a deeper underlying anxiety among Chinese experts regarding the consequences of the US decision. Zhu Feng, Executive Director of the Collaborative Innovation Center for South China Sea Studies at the University of Nanjing, argues that the new State Department’s official position amounts to a change of the US role in the region.¹⁵ For him, since the establishment of US-PRC relations in 1979, the US acted mostly as a “bystander” (旁观者) in the South China Sea. From his perspective, the United States maintained an overall neutrality during the deadly 1988 Johnson South Reef battle between China and Vietnam, or when the PLA seized Mischief Reef from the Philippines in 1995. Zhu Feng notes the US reacted to these Chinese territorial advances by stressing the necessary peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea. Closer to now, **the 2012 confrontation between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal provided a unique example, according to Zhu Feng, of the US trying to act as a “peace mediator” (和事佬),** using a Chinese term with a slightly derogatory connotation (佬). In his piece, Zhu Feng does not address the damage caused by this failed mediation. The seizure of Scarborough Shoal by China undermined the credibility of the Obama administration, raising questions about its ability to defend the territorial status quo in East Asia from Chinese expansionist ambitions.

Looking ahead, for Zhu Feng, **the new US position is a prelude to an increased military presence by the United States in the South China Sea,** and there is a risk for China that the American position encourages Southeast Asian claimants to take provocative and confrontational actions.

13. “Pompeo’s attempts to create trouble in the South China Sea are bound to fail (蓬佩奥之流南海作妖的企图必成泡影)”, Beijing Daily, 19 July 2020, <http://www.bjd.com.cn/a/202007/19/WS5f144491e4b00aba04d272e5.html>.

14. Carl Thayer, “A Closer Look at the ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct.” The Diplomat, 13 August 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/a-closer-look-at-the-asean-china-single-draft-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>.

15. Zhu Feng, “U.S. South China Sea policy is undergoing a dangerous transition (美国南海政策正出现危险转型)”, Global Times, 16 July 2020, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/3z4XGN0Nw5i>.

The US military presence

In July 2020, the US Navy deployed the two aircraft-carrier battle groups USS Nimitz and USS Reagan in the first dual carrier exercises in the South China Sea since 2014. This is only the third time that such wargames have been conducted since 2001. One exercise involved the simultaneous deployment of a B-52 nuclear-capable bomber to practice long-range strike missions. Such a spectacular show of military power **aims at deterring China from taking the risk of new unilateral moves in the South China Sea and reassures Southeast Asian claimant states**, at a time in the Covid-19 pandemic context when the People's Liberation Army has adopted an assertive posture on territorial issues in the East China Sea and over Taiwan, culminating in the border clash in Ladakh with the Indian army. Combined with the new position issued by the State Department, the US Navy exercises signal a strong resolve to maintain a robust naval presence in the South China Sea, through Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs).

Zhang Junshe, researcher at the People's Liberation Army Naval Military Academic Research Institute, describes these US exercises on China Military Network as **"futile provocations"** (挑衅行动注定徒劳无功) that will not affect the "generally stable" (总体稳定) situation on the South China Sea.¹⁶ Echoing the narrative pushed in the Chinese media by experts regarding the change of position by the US on the 2016 arbitration award, Zhang Junshe argues **that rather than American naval maneuvers, the main story in the South China Sea is the ongoing negotiation of the Code of Conduct.**

At the same time, China has in recent years changed its communication regarding US air and naval operations in the South China Sea, stepping up efforts to denounce the constant military presence of the United States there. The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI),¹⁷ a think-tank at Peking University led by maritime strategist Hu Bo, and the National Institute for South China Sea Studies in Hainan, a think-tank under the Foreign Ministry with a constant presence in the opinion and international pages of the *Global Times*, provide timely and detailed reports of US maritime surveillance, FONOPs and military exercises. Most of these analyses are translated in English and the SCSPI also has a considerable presence on Twitter. **The goal appears to be framing a narrative that instability in the South China Sea is caused by US military presence.**

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In late June 2020, the Hainan Institute issued a report on US military presence in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁸ The report acknowledges an "absolute US military superiority in the Asia-Pacific region, and for a long time".¹⁹ It lists the newest deployments by the United States as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which relies on the 375,000 troops under the Indo-Pacific Command, and overall concentrates 60% of the US Navy's naval ships and 2/3 of the Marine Corps strength. Chinese analysts pay particular attention to the deployment of the B1B bomber from Anderson Airbase in training missions in the East and South China Seas since it has replaced the ageing B-52H.

In an interview to the *Global Times* later translated in English, Wu Shicun, President of the National Institute for the South China Sea Studies, argues that

16. Zhang Junshe, "U.S. military provocations in South China Sea destined to be futile (美在南海的军事挑衅注定徒劳无功)", China Military Online, 13 July 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-07/13/content_265910.htm.

17. South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, <http://www.scspi.org/en>.

18. Yu Xiaoping, "China's National Institute for South China Sea Studies Releases Report on U.S. Military Presence in Asia-Pacific: U.S. Strengthens Military Deterrence Amid Epidemic (南海研究院发布美亚太军力报告：疫情之下美国加强军事威慑)", The Paper, 24 June 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7982672.

19. "Report Launch: U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific 2020 (《美国在亚太地区的军力报告(2020)》发布会)", China's National Institute for South China Sea Studies, 23 June 2020, <http://www.nanhai.org.cn/dynamic-detail/35/9547.html>.

"China should not panic.²⁰ We need to know that the US won't have much more practical new moves. Thus we need to integrate our maritime power and study the changes in the mode of future maritime war, and form our own deterrence force." **He asserts that the US would not deploy naval power to prevent China from stopping Vietnam's drilling in the Spratly. However, like Zhu Feng, he worries that the current US posture will be interpreted as an opportunity by Vietnam and the Philippines.**

The US annual Freedom of Navigation Report²¹ lists seven FONOPs conducted in the East and South China Seas in 2019, a level similar to 2017 and 2018 - the reports²² during the Obama administration did not contain the number of FONOPs. In addition to freedom of navigation operations and surveillance

flights, the US has also changed its approach to transfers through the Taiwan Strait, with at least seven transits between January and May 2020. Commenting the publication of the Hainan Institute's report on US military operations, Wu Shicun argues that three elements will determine the outcome of US-China competition: the struggle

China needs to find the right balance between "defending Chinese rights" and maintaining regional stability over the long term.

for the dominance of maritime affairs in the Western Pacific (对于西太平洋海上主导权的争夺), the capacity to control maritime trade routes and the capacity to deliver on the needs of allies and friends. In other words, **the balance of power, but also the quality of economic offers and the delivery of public goods.**

Chinese strategy: staying the course?

The July developments point to the larger question for China on how to adjust to the US pushback in the South China Sea under the Trump administration. In an in-depth academic analysis, Dai Zheng and Zheng Xianwu, scholars at Nanking University's South China Sea Center **stress the Chinese achievements in the areas of blue economy and marine science and technology since the 18th Party Congress of 2012, which made building a strong maritime power (海洋强国) an official national goal.**²³ They address China's strategy in the South China Sea from the wider perspective of the strategic importance of the ocean and describe the process of building a maritime power as a contribution to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

A similar focus on the long term strategic importance can be found in the account that Hu Xin, Research Associate at Hainan's National Institute for South China Sea Studies, gives of the South China Sea Forum, held in Nanjing in late November 2019, an event that brings together leading Chinese experts and academics.²⁴ The conclusion of the discussion is that facing US pressure, **China needs to stay on its course in the South China Sea, remain "calm and rational", and pay particular attention to maintaining risks and challenges under control.** China needs to find the right balance between "defending Chinese rights" and maintaining regional stability over the long term (长期维权和维稳相结合), until the moment when China reaches a new balance in its relationship with the United States.

From a historical perspective, China's policy towards the South China Sea in the 1970s and the 1980s was centered on territorial disputes and on the use of military power to defend Chinese claims. Today's approach is more **complex and diversified** - Dai Zheng and Zheng Xianwu describe it as a **"two-pronged strategy" (双管齐下) based on differentiated treatments (区别对待).** The current Chinese strategy mixes elements of cooperation and struggle in a differentiated way towards regional states and non-regional stakeholders,

20. Zhao Yusha, and Li Sikun, "By Denying China's Legitimate Claims, US Rips off 'Fig Leaf' Used to Cover Its Vile Intention in South China Sea - Global Times", Global Times, 16 July 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1194778.shtml>.

21. U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2019", 2019, <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY19%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-07-14-140514-643×tamp=1594749943344>.

22. U.S. Department of Defense. "Annual Freedom of Navigation Reports." Policy.Defense.Gov. <https://policy.defense.gov/OSDP-Offices/FON/>.

23. Dai Zheng and Zheng Xianwu, "A preliminary discussion about China's security strategy in the South China Sea Dispute in the Recent Decade: Differential treatment and a two-pronged strategy (中国近年南海争端安全战略: "区别对待, 双管齐下")", Indian Ocean Economic Studies, No. 5, 2019, pp. 106-129.

24. Hu Xin, "The Game of Great Powers and the Development of the South China Sea, a Summary of the 2019 South China Sea Forum (大国博弈与南海局势的发展——2019"南海论坛"综述)", Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Studies, No. 3, 2020, pp. 66-73.

mainly the United States. The authors argue that China has been able to diversify its strategy simply because greater power means more policy options. China is now able to conduct normalized law-enforcement patrols, offer public goods, make greater use of economic cooperation with regional states in support of its strategic goals in the South China Sea. In short, **China has departed Deng's guideline of "hiding talent and biding time" (韬光养晦) to comply with Xi Jinping's 2013 guideline of "striving for achievements" (奋发有为).**

For the two authors, cooperating and struggling simultaneously allows China to "take the initiative" (主动权) in the process of dispute settlement in the South China Sea. They conclude that "cooperation is the main approach, and struggle is supplementary" (合作为主，斗争为辅). For them, that no major crisis has occurred in the South China Sea after Scarborough Shoal and the Spring 2014 standoff with Vietnam over the deployment of China's 981 Oil Rig in the Paracels is the result of the adoption of the Chinese dual-track policy (双轨方针) in August 2014. This has been defined as handling the historical disputes through direct talks between the parties involved, while maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea jointly with ASEAN.

On the "struggle" side of China's strategy, there is the need to **focus on "interdicting foreign ships from illegally entering the territorial seas and the airspace around Chinese islands and reefs" (反制外国舰机非法进入中国岛礁领空水域)**, a point in direct contradiction with the 2016 arbitration award. They consider the foreign presence inside the South China Sea in support of Freedom of Navigation as a disruptive factor (扰流), which has an influence on regional trends. But as a factor among others, it should not prevent China from addressing the core of the problem, which is its relationship with Southeast Asia. On a diplomatic level, China should focus on preventing the issue from being "hyped up" (防止其炒作某些话题) in order to avoid negative effects on its relations with claimant states.

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The second focus area of "struggle" is **preventing claimant states from conducting activities that aim at unilaterally changing the status quo.** This remains the official Chinese narrative of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, which ended in a Chinese victory. To achieve this goal, it is particularly important for China to insist on direct consultations (坚持通过协商解决问题) and avoid the "legalization" (司法化) of the South China Sea disputes. The authors observe that by firmly insisting on this principle, China managed to "break the deadlock" in China-Philippines relations caused by the South China Sea "arbitration storm" (仲裁风波).

But there is also an important cooperative side to China's South China Sea policy. The authors argue that **China should pay attention to promote regional institutionalization so as to "advance China's moral high ground" (增强中国在南海主权声索中的合道义性).** Building a positive image (树立良好形象) takes providing public goods to the region. The authors insist on the importance of the South China Sea Rescue Bureau of the Ministry of Transportation (交通运输部南海救助局), established in 2003, to the construction of China's positive image. According to statistics, as of May 2020, the unit has performed 4,893 rescue missions, successfully rescued 1,244 ships in distress (including 135 foreign ships), rescued 19,608 people in distress (including 1,747 foreigners).²⁵ This recommendation of stressing providing public goods also concludes the account of the 2019 South China Sea Forum summarized by Hu Xin.

²⁵ Nanhai Rescue Bureau of the Ministry of Transport of PRC, https://www.nh-rescue.cn/dwgk/index_13.html.

In addition, the participants of the 2019 South China Sea Forum place more importance on crisis management diplomacy as a tool. They **advocate strengthening military and diplomatic relations with Vietnam and the Philippines** to enhance mutual trust with the two most problematic claimant states, and enhancing track 1,5 and track 2 at the bilateral level to promote mutual understanding. Unsurprisingly, the multilateral level, such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is hardly mentioned, **as China has more leverage in a bilateral setting to conduct its diplomacy**. Crisis management diplomacy to avoid unplanned sea and air encounters and incidents that could lead to escalation is also advocated vis-à-vis the United States.

These articles suggest that Chinese analysts generally see the increased US pushback as a storm that should be weathered patiently, rather than confronted directly, given the asymmetry in military power. They however do not represent a guarantee that the policy choices of the Central Military Commission and the Politburo of the Party will follow such a line.



THE MIRAGE OF CHINA'S WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY

The hardline diplomatic tone adopted by some senior Chinese officials in the past year has caused controversies and raised many questions surrounding the aims of China's foreign policy. **The perception in the West and China's own description of China's diplomacy style diverge significantly.** While Western officials and analysts denounce excessive Chinese aggressiveness, Chinese officials and experts reject the use of the term "wolf warrior diplomacy". The denial is often targeted at the term "wolf warrior diplomacy", while at the same time the shift in China's diplomatic style is recognised to a certain extent.

The recognition of the change is generally **accompanied by a justification: the unfriendly international environment China is exposed to.** In an interview, Ruan Zongze, Executive Vice President of the China Institute of International Studies, argues that "wolf warrior diplomacy" is a distorted and **misleading interpretation of China's diplomacy which attempts to deny China's right to defend its legitimate rights and interests.**²⁶ He asserts that China needs to shape the international environment in its favor, and this has nothing to do with "wolf warrior". Also in defense of this shift in tone, Liu Xiaoming, China's ambassador to the UK, claims that "the reason why Chinese diplomats have to fight wolf wars is because there are wolves in this world (因为世界上有狼，中国外交官才要做“战狼”)"'.²⁷

In the more specific context of Sino-US relations, Wang Jisi, President of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, notes that the attitude of the Chinese government, think tanks, media and public opinion towards the United States has changed significantly in the past two years, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis.²⁸ For a long time before that, China-US relations were seen as a top priority, with the belief that the principle of "hiding talent and biding time (韬光养晦)" should be upheld in policy towards the US. Today, these views have faded from the mainstream public opinion platform and have been replaced by the idea that China should adopt a tit for tat

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policy approach and retaliate against all hostile US moves. Wang Jisi also predicts that Sino-American information, public opinion and diplomatic wars will become the new normal, China will no longer tolerate attacks from the US and will not hesitate to confront the US.

Not all Chinese experts praise this increasingly aggressive diplomatic style. Shi Zhan, Professor at China Foreign Affairs University, takes the quality issue of masks exported from China as an example.²⁹ He points out that when being questioned about the quality of masks, threatening to no longer provide masks is not the correct response. Masks should not be "weaponized". **China should be more cautious as such aggressive behavior risks isolation from the rest of the world.**



VIVIANA ZHU

Viviana Zhu is the Policy Officer for Institut Montaigne's Asia Program. She became the editor of the Institute's quarterly publication, *China Trends*, in March 2020. Before joining Institut Montaigne in January 2019, Viviana worked as Coordinator of the Asia Program of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). She holds a Master's degree in International Politics and a Bachelor's degree in Politics and Economics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, where her primary focus was China and international politics.

26. "Wang Yi talks about 'War Wolf Diplomacy' for the first time. What is the logic behind China's current diplomacy? (王毅首谈“战狼外交”，当下中国外交背后有怎样的逻辑)", *The Paper*, 24 May 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/yidian_promDetail.jsp?contid=7550262&from=yidian.

27. "Ambassador to Britain: Chinese diplomats have to fight wolf wars is because there are wolves in this world (驻英大使：因为世界上有狼，中国外交官才要做“战狼”)", *Beijing Daily*, 24 May 2020, <http://www.bjd.com.cn/a/202005/24/WS5eca85fde4b00aba04d1e437.html>.

28. Wang Jisi, "U.S.-China Relations under the COVID-19 Pandemic (新冠疫情下的中美关系)", *Aisixiang*, 8 April 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/120783.html>.

29. "PKU Diplomacy School Professor: 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' misleads the country (北大博士外交学院教授：“战狼”误国)", *China Business Focus*, 28 April 2020, <http://www.cbfa.com/appxg/cbf-201587830.html>.

Shi Yinhong, Professor at Renmin University's School of International Studies, and Zhu Feng, Dean of Nanjing University's Institute of International Relations, both **conclude that aggressive foreign policy does not serve China's national interest**.³⁰ According to Shi Yinhong, China is currently having conflicts with several developed countries, especially with Australia and Canada, while its relationship with Russia appears to be less promising. In the current context of COVID-19 crisis, China should allocate its resources towards critical areas and avoid making enemies. Shi Yinhong's assessment is echoed by Zhu Feng, who goes back to the nature of diplomacy. **Diplomacy is not about "lashing out (怒怼)" at others.** It is an art of persuasion and influence, and there is a need of making choices and selections (有所取舍, 有所甄别).

However, in the assessment of Shi Yinhong and Zhu Feng, the US seems to be an exception. Shi Yinhong argues that avoiding conflicts with others is about concentrating China's resources. Both analyses of Shi Yinhong, Zhu Feng and Wang Jisi, despite having opposite starting points, foresee an increasingly hard stance of China against the US. By contrast, Yuan Nansheng, Vice President of the Chinese Association for International Relations and former Ambassador to Zimbabwe and Party secretary of China's Foreign Affairs University, **warns against the risk of strategic misjudgement, especially vis-a-vis the US and the misconception that the US is in decline**.³¹ He points out that Chinese citizens are now paying more attention to international affairs, and there **is a market for a more offensive diplomatic style as a result of a sentiment of national pride** and confidence in the strength of China. However, he stresses the risk of appeasing public opinion: "History has shown that **foreign policy hijacked by public opinion inevitably leads to disastrous results**". In addition, Yuan Nansheng argues that "hiding talent and biding time" does not imply being weak. He explains that in diplomacy, it means dealing with other in a humble manner and "keep the sword in the scabbard (把宝剑插进刀鞘)". There is no need to show the sword as others know that China has one. "China should develop its diplomatic strength, not simply become tougher (中国外交应该强起来, 而不是单纯的强硬起来)".

In the eyes of Chinese experts, as China approaches the center of the world stage, it has triggered a chain reaction in the international community.

On the other hand, some Chinese experts look into the issue of China's challenges at a global level. For Zhao Kejin, Deputy Director of Tsinghua's Center for U.S.-China Relations, and Qi Zhenhong, President of China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), one of the biggest challenges faced by China's diplomacy is the **extent to which the world is able to understand and accept China's development**.

Zhao Kejin argues that China is currently "big but not strong (大而不强)" and "rich but not superior (富而不优)", and this has caused a series of diplomatic incidents.³² Those include the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, the South China Sea dispute, China-US trade frictions, and the China-India border confrontation. In the eyes of Chinese experts, as China approaches the center of the world stage, it has triggered a chain reaction in the international community. Theories of "China's threat", "China's debt trap", "China's neo-colonialism" have become popular, and **various strategic moves to obstruct China's rise or generate skepticism and doubts regarding China's ultimate intentions are frequently made**. This includes the criticism of China's diplomacy style. In other words, China is facing the issue of non-acceptance in the international community. As a solution, Qi Zhenhong advocates greater communication and exchanges with political parties, think tanks, scholars, and media in other countries, in order to build a consensus on a new type of international relations.³³

30. "Shi Yinhong: 'Will China lead the world post COVID-19?' Shi Yinhong: On the contrary, China should strategically hold tight (时殷弘: '疫后中国将领导世界?' 时殷弘: 相反, 中国应战略收缩)", Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, 28 July 2020, http://www.rdcy.org/index/index/news_cont/id/679855.html.

31. "Senior Diplomat Yuan Nansheng: The pandemic is changing the world order, preventing strategic miscalculation (资深外交官 袁南生: 疫情改变世界秩序, 防止发生战略误判)", Ling Xun, 28 April 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1665206137556762919&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

32. Zhao Kejin, "70 Years of Chinese Diplomacy: Historical Logic and Basic Experience (中国外交70年: 历史逻辑与基本经验)", Northeast Asia Forum, No. 2, 2019.

33. "Developing innovative theories of international relations and promoting a fair and mutually beneficial international system. China's Diplomacy is Proactive, Progressive and Responsive (发展创新国际关系理论 推动国际体系公平互惠 中国外交主动应变 进取担当)", China Daily, 21 July 2020, <https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/21/WS5f16aaa1a310a859d09d931a.html>.

Some Chinese experts dismiss the likelihood of a new cold war, based on their belief that **China does not aim to become a hegemonic power**. According to Wang Cungang, Professor at Nankai University, China's constant mention of its anti-hegemonic foreign policy on the reports of the National Congress of the Communist Party of China should be taken as a strong and valid proof of China's position.³⁴ He also argues that China belongs to a new model of major countries (新型大国), and is **not at all a great power in the traditional sense** (绝非传统意义上的大国). Therefore, **China will never follow "the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony" (国强必霸)**. According to Ruan Zongze, Executive Vice President of the China Institute of International Studies, China is currently "rolling a boulder uphill (滚石上山)" and it would be **unwise for China to provoke conflicts or disputes**.³⁵ He also adds that no single country has ever led the world in the past, and this will never happen in the future. Hence, the concern over China's intention to be in a leadership position in the international order is unnecessary.

34. Wang Cuigang, "The Hundred-Year Unprecedented Change and the Chinese Communist Party's Diplomatic Leadership (百年未有之大变局与中国共产党外交领导力)", *World Economics and Politics*, No. 5, 2020.

35. Ruan Zongze, "The Warmth, Splendor and Dynamism of China's Diplomacy (中国外交的温度、亮度与力度)", *Global Times*, 26 May 2020, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/3y05FPWujSO>.

In the current context, Cai Tuo, Director of the Center for Globalization and Global Issues Studies at the Chinese University of Political Science and Law, underlines that cold war thinking should be avoided since a new cold war would

not solve the problem caused by political differences.³⁶ In addition, according to Yuan Nansheng, **a new Cold War means complete US-China decoupling, which is impossible to realise in terms of trade**. Unlike the Cold War period, the current climate of global economic interdependence

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makes it no longer possible to create two parallel economic systems and markets.

36. Cai Tuo, "The game between rationality and irrationality - Symptoms and Responses to the Great Global Change (理性与非理性的博弈—全球大变局的症结与应对)", *Exploration and Free Views*, No. 1, 2019, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/114880.html>.

In sum, **Chinese experts acknowledge the change in China's diplomatic style**. The defenders argue that China has been placed in a difficult position and forced to act aggressively to protect its own interests. Others argue that China's aggressive diplomacy style is counter-productive. Given that China is still not accepted by the international community, China should be in conflict avoidance mode and is not in a position to be confrontational. Finally, there is a strong emphasis on China's commitment to avoid a new cold war, which is not in line with China's goal and will inevitably harm China's interest.

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MEMBERS

FRANÇOIS GODEMENT

Senior Advisor for Asia
fgodement@institutmontaigne.org

MATHIEU DUCHÂTEL

Director of the Asia Program
mduchatel@institutmontaigne.org

CLAIRE LEMOINE

Program Officer - Asia
cleoime@institutmontaigne.org

VIVIANA ZHU

Policy Officer - Asia
vzhu@institutmontaigne.org

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