

Impacts of Chinese Domestic Politics on China's Foreign Policy

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With China's economy growing to become the second-largest in the world, China's relevance in world politics has also increased. Often, the country has been accused of being arbitrary and arrogant, with terms such as 'aggressive' and 'assertive' being used to describe its foreign policy (Blaauw, 2013). The country's foreign policy has been a matter of debate throughout the world, with some discussions even concluding that China wants to take a leading geopolitical role and perhaps become the world's greatest superpower. As Blaaw (2013) argues, the political influence of China on other countries is still limited, and the country can be said to be a 'global actor' rather than a 'global power.' Indeed, China does not have a single-defined foreign policy, but rather, all are closely linked to domestic policies. Most of these policies are resource driven and are reactive to certain events (Blaauw, 2013). It is worth noting that nationalism is also a crucial driving force of China's foreign policy. To this end, this paper to analyses the effects that domestic politics in China has on the country's foreign policy.

The highest authority of state power in China is The National People's Congress, and it meets every two weeks to review foreign and domestic policy matters (Hussain, 2011). Officially, China states that it pursues an independent foreign policy of peace. This is to preserve (1) its independence; (2) sovereignty and territorial integrity; (3) create a conducive environment for opening up and reform; (4) maintain world peace and increase development (Hussain, 2011). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is tasked with the responsibility of implementing foreign policies in China. Indeed, China's foreign policy is considered realistic, and it gives precedence to national interest rather than the pursuit of optimal solutions for the benefit of international society (Hussain, 2011).

In domestic politics, Xi Jinping, China's president since 2012, has accumulated more authority and power than Hu Jintao, his predecessor (Lunn, 2017). The communist party that he leads focuses on anti-corruption as the focal point of domestic policy with the intent of strengthening it in the long-term and regaining the political monopoly it enjoyed since 1949 (Lunn, 2017). Efforts of rejuvenating the party have also incorporated 'institutionalisation' processes that involve the creation of rules to guide administrative and political behavior. In the recent years, the country has witnessed economic warning signs, but the party still enjoys support from a significant proportion of the Chinese people. This can be attributed to the fact that the country is still recording high overall growth rates (Lunn, 2017). However, some party officials at local levels have been accused of having a predatory behavior even though this discontent has not been transferred to officials at the national level.

The diplomacy of China remains risk-averse and usually maintains a low profile, a move introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 (Blaauw, 2013). These policies were implemented to enhance the integration of China with the rest of the international system. As Blaauw (2013) explains, China's military capacity has been growing, but it has not been able to project this power internationally except for its cyber warfare capacities. In fact, the country avoids international conflicts when they arise, and even remains passive in major conferences and discussions involving global governance issues and international security challenges. It does not, however, remain silent on issues surrounding human rights, Taiwan, and Maritime territorial claims. Godement (2012) states "But China has neither settled nor even compromised on long-standing territorial claims with almost all of its maritime neighbours, and with India. There have been bilateral or sub-regional thaws or even honeymoons, yet none have been accompanied by an internationally binding legal commitment to compromise or restraint" (28).

Jinping's administration has become more assertive when it comes to selected issues involving foreign policies. For instance, he has increased assertiveness on border disputes along its periphery. However, his assertiveness on major drivers of foreign policy has remained unchanged such as increasing the strength of Communist Party, defending territorial integrity and sovereignty and ensuring increased economic development (Blaauw, 2013). Since 2010, the country's foreign policies have become forceful in international relations particularly with the West, triggering firm reactions in the Asian region. Tensions between China and Japan has increased following disputed islands of Senkaku, and with China becoming economic stronger with time, these tensions are not expected to end easily (Blaauw, 2013). Indeed, when China cooperated with the United Nations sanctions on North Korea, this gave a clear indication that China was moderating its foreign policies.

The significant growth of China is a result of policies implemented by the Communist Party in 1978 with the aim of engaging economic reforms. The country's foreign policy is established with three major objectives (Blaauw, 2013). First is to further the dominance of the communist party in the country. Policies are founded on this goal, and for it to be achieved, the government must constantly ensure that the population's welfare is increasing. Blaauw (2013) notes that this objective has been properly managed. The second objective was to defend territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country and to unify with Taiwan. The last major objective was to enhance economic growth and development in the country.

Following the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, China's assertiveness on foreign policy was well demonstrated in the year 2010. The way in which the country managed major political tensions in the Asian region revealed a change in tone and posture of the country's foreign policy. For example, China responded in a different way to North Korea's acts of aggression (Blaauw,

2013). The change in tone was also evident when it was addressing its maritime borders. Indeed, the approach adopted by China indicated that it was becoming more 'forceful' towards other countries especially the USA.

There are two major factors that drove the change in China's tone towards other countries. First, strategic and economic thinkers in Beijing among many people argued that America had been weakened by the financial crisis (Blaauw, 2013). The financial position of the USA was assumed to be weak, and hence Chinese leaders were concluding that the USA could no longer be able to maintain its security presence in the Asian region. Chinese leaders, including the then president, saw this as an opportunity to pursue its interests especially on territorial disputes and its regional relations with Japan.

The second driver was the upcoming political transition in the country (Blaauw, 2013). Ahead of the transition in 2010, China was concerned that there would be domestic instability hence the government saw that an aggressive foreign policy would be a winning story for the administration (Blaauw, 2013). This made the government push this agenda, as demonstrated in the firm foreign policies implemented with regards to maritime border disputes. Unfortunately, this change was unsuccessful and did not work to China's advantage as it lost a significant amount of political capital and geopolitical credibility in the region and at the same time, its relations with the West worsened. Such political moves by the Chinese government have often been used as evidence that the country is increasingly becoming powerful and a self-interested nation that does what it can to increase its comprehensive power. However, following the failure of this change in diplomatic stance, the administration reviewed/recalibrated its diplomatic stance.

In 2009, Germany was replaced by China as the world's largest exporter, with 9% of total global exports coming from China. Primarily, China exports to developing countries, but in the

past few years, its dependence on these countries has also increased. According to Raauw (2013), China's export growth is not sustainable hence the country needs to undergo an economic transformation. He states that the country needs to promote equal distribution of incomes and introduce new market forces and environmental controls. Therefore, China needs to focus more on domestic issues since the country's role in world politics significantly depends on its stability and internal developments.

One of the primary driving forces of China's foreign policy from an economic perspective is the import of resources, particularly raw materials. These resources also play a significant role in determining external economic relations (Blaauw, 2013). Other than oil, China's major imports are energy commodities and some natural resources such as minerals (gold, metal, copper) and agricultural commodities. This means that international relations are important for the country to ensure a steady supply of commodities necessary for stable domestic growth. Furthermore, countries to which China exports products are crucial sources of these commodities; hence China needs them for a supply of raw materials. China also needs advanced economies such as Germany and USA for machinery, technologies and specialised equipment (Blaauw, 2013). A sound foreign policy, therefore, goes a long way in helping China achieve both its short-term and long-term goals.

Jinping's interests are inward-looking and are focused on the development of the country. In fact, Blaauw (2013) states that to make changes to its foreign policies, China uses a trial and error technique to constantly receive feedback through reactions of other countries, evident unresolved issues, and domestic reactions. When it comes to international conflicts, China's foreign policies ensure that economic development is not distracted, hence it tries to appease or freeze the conflicts. Further, China alternates its orientation and behavior when dealing with issues

in the region as it sometimes takes assertive stances against its neighbors while at other times, it applies charm-offensive stances (Blaauw, 2013). Concerning sea conflicts and Taiwan, Jinping keeps the status quo since the country is growing faster than its neighbours. It is suspected that China is waiting to gain more influence before it can start making tough foreign policies in this aspect. In fact, China has also been accused of neglecting regional relations and only focussing on domestic issues, sometimes at the expense of international relations. For a counterbalance, some countries in the region turn to America for a strategic partnership, including Myanmar which was traditionally close to China.

Under President Xi Jinping, the primary aim of China's foreign policy has been to 'rejuvenate the nation' and 'strive for achievement' (Lunn, 2017). Indeed, these objectives have forced China to move from the approaches used by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s since they involve high international involvement. Skeptics point to China's rapid military modernisation and increasing assertiveness and proactivity over its territorial claims of South and East China Seas as proof of China's mounting ambitions. However, Lunn (2017) disagrees and says that although China has a significant interest in achieving these objectives, it aims at doing so through 'peaceful international relations.' He also states that China is not strong enough to challenge America.

The experience gained by Chinese leaders from domestic politics has a big effect on how they handle international matters (Xie, 2014). However, most political analysts often overlook domestic politics as a source of China's foreign policies especially in the push for international financial system reforms. In July 2014, the creation of BRICS Development Bank marked a crucial victory in China's push for reforms in the financial system of the world (Xie, 2014). Although China has a centralised political system, economic reforms in the country have never been easy because of the influence of domestic politics.

Indeed, Chinese leaders believe the country is a rising power. Although their approach to foreign policy is not guided by a single vision, the approach is slowly becoming a 'norm and system shaper.' In fact, Lunn (2017) states that the manner in which it approaches foreign policy is highly pragmatic, and it upholds global rules that 'make life easier.' This view concludes that the country is an 'ultimate utilitarian power' that does not aspire to 'overwhelm the rest of the world.' This argument might be true, but with such interests in Asia, China must to some extent have a non-negotiable line on foreign policy. For example, the 'One China' policy (that the future of Taiwan is with the People's Republic of China) is the least negotiable (Lunn, 2017). If the USA were to repudiate this policy today, then China's foreign policy would shift from pragmatism to assertiveness. It is worth noting that some Chinese leaders believe that a clash between USA and China is inevitable. If these leaders were to ally with the current inflamed public opinion, Jinping would find it difficult to control, and this could trigger domestic instability and escalate international tensions (Lunn, 2017).

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