

## China's Assertive Foreign Policy Strategy. Insights from the 19th Party Congress

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During the last three decades of the twentieth century, the world has witnessed the rise of China in the global economy. The “reform and opening - up” policy (*Gaige kaifang* 改革开放) introduced in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, drove the country to three decades of double-digit economic growth and the transition of a rural and isolated China into a \$11 trillion economy. A deep restructuring of the political order after Mao Zedong’s death and the implementation of unprecedented economic policies laid the foundations that would turn China into the world’s second-largest economy. China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 was the catalyst for its conclusive opening to the free market and its positioning as a significant actor in the global economy. Rising from the sixth position in the 2001 global ranking to the third in 2007, and the second in 2010, China shifted from a regional economy to a global one after its WTO’s accession. In light of this, China’s economic growth has been cataloged by the World Bank as the “fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history”<sup>1</sup>.

Since Xi Jinping’s ascendance to power, a “new era” on the path of China’s rise as a global power was established. His speech at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) recalls the fact that China has placed itself in a perfect position to translate its economic growth into political strength and leverage. In the words of the Chinese President, the country is “closer, more confident, and more capable than ever before of making the goal of national rejuvenation a reality”<sup>2</sup>, which essentially means restoring China to its rightful place in the world as a major power. With “national revival” (*fuxing* 复兴) as a core concept, the “China dream” (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) narrative encompasses, on the one hand, the domestic dimension that upholds Xi Jinping’s vision for China’s development during the next decades as well as a source of legitimacy of domestic politics<sup>3</sup>; and on the other hand, the “China dream” also embraces the international dimension which refers to China regaining its lost international status as a great power and embodies the platform presenting China’s aspirations of being acknowledge as a great power in the international realm as well as the instruments to achieve so.

Both China's leading position in the global economy and its clear decision of regaining its great power status and being recognized as such by the international community have led this country to play an active role within the international system and to be involved in all significant global and economic issues. Indeed, China has emerged as an inexorable actor in the international arena which has resulted in an enhanced position for China in global governance, and its increasing worldwide economic, political, security and cultural engagement. A step forward in China's rising path is the launching of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (*yidai yilu* 一帶一路; OBOR, recently called the "Belt and Road Initiative", BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. This initiative reflects a shift in China's foreign policy strategy which indicates the adoption of a more assertive foreign policy approach: the "striving for achievement" (*fenfa youwei* – 奋发有为) foreign policy strategy. This strategy unveils China's interest to enhance its worldwide influence through a more self-directed and forward-looking policy<sup>4</sup> that leads China to play a more active and influential role at the world stage. The foreign policy priorities, principles, and initiatives tackled by Xi Jinping in his report at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC in October 2017, suggest that an adjustment between the "keeping a low profile" (*tao guang yang hui* 韬光养晦) and the "striving for achievement" has taken place. Therefore, the implementation of a more assertive and confident foreign policy during Xi Jinping's second term is expected.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues on the one hand, that there has been a continuity in China's foreign policy strategy since Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, followed by a transition between the latter and Xi Jinping, and finally an adjustment, from the "keeping a low profile" strategy to the "striving for achievement" strategy since the year 2014. This adjustment involves the continuity of some longstanding foreign policy features from the previous eras such as the link between a peaceful external environment and domestic development, along with the inclusion of new concepts such as a "new type of international relations" (*xinxing guoji guanxi* 新型國際關係) and a "new type of major country relations" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*, 新型大國關係). On the other hand, this paper also argues that the foreign policy themes and initiatives stressed by Xi Jinping at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress held in October 2017, show the increasingly assertive nature of China's foreign policy in the years to come. China will follow a more assertive foreign policy approach that will seek to deepen the foreign policy actions implemented so far, aiming at turning China into a moderately prosperous society and a developed country, as well as increasing its worldwide influence. These arguments are supported by the textual analysis of data gathered from different authoritative sources<sup>5</sup>. This includes a number of sources that range from selected speeches of President Xi Jinping and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi from 2013 to 2017, to white papers and press releases from the official press agency *Xinhua*.

The structure of the paper goes as follows. The first section shed light on China's foreign policy strategies since Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping. This section analyzes the transition between foreign policy strategies in 2008 during the Hu-Wen era with the objective of providing the context that allows us to understand how with Xi Jinping's ascendance to power an adjustment, rather than a rupture, takes place between the "keeping a low profile" strategy and the "striving for achievement" strategy. The second section attempts to explain the rationale behind the previous argument by describing the elements of continuity and innovation in Xi Jinping's foreign policy. Finally, the third and last section will explore some insights from the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in order to comprehend the assertive nature of China's foreign policy and Xi Jinping's strategic thinking during his second term.

### **The Transition Between Foreign Policy Strategies. From "keeping a low profile" to "striving for achievement".**

Since 2012 several Chinese and western scholars have engaged in the debate about the shift from the "keeping a low profile" (KLP- hereafter) to the "striving for achievement" (SFA – hereafter) strategy. This debate has addressed different aspects of this issue such as whether there has been a shift in China's foreign policy approach. If so, when this shift took place? May this shift be attributed to Xi Jinping's ascendance to power and his vision of China's regaining its rightful place in the world, or can some features of this shift be found in former generations of Chinese leadership?<sup>6</sup> This section argues that a transition between the KLP strategy adopted by Deng Xiaoping at the beginning of the 90's, and the SFA strategy adopted by Xi Jinping in the years 2013-2014 occurred during the Hu-We era. One of the signs of this transition can be found in Hu Jintao's speech at the Meeting Marking the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Reform and Opening Up in 2009. In his speech, he stated that "we should resolutely safeguard China's interest in terms of sovereignty, security and development"<sup>7</sup>. This statement as we will see later indicates the definition and inclusion of China's core interests (*hexin liyi* 核心利益) as a key principle of Chinese diplomacy while redefining the purpose of China's foreign policy<sup>8</sup>.

#### The Basis of the KLP Strategy

The KLP strategy is rooted in what is known as Deng Xiaoping's "24-characters strategy". In these 24 characters, Deng summarized the guiding principles of its foreign policy and security strategy, which can be conceived as a reaction of China to the international community's response to the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989, as well as a way to safeguard the CPC from the breakdown of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Facing this scenario "Deng urged the Communist Party of China (CPC), the government, and the people to remain calm until the implications of the changing global landscape became clear, including the manner in which the West would exert pressure on China. At the same time, he reminded the Chinese people that the environment of

transition also created new opportunities for China and its economic reform agenda”<sup>9</sup>. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Deng’s strategic thinking was focused on making China’s economic development and the projection of a non-confrontational posture in the international realm its top priorities in order to integrate China into the global economy. Thus, the “24-character strategy”, which commonly translated into “observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership”, was in line with these priorities and set forth the foundations and principles for China’s foreign policy during the next two decades.

Hence, China’s foreign policy strategy in the post-Cold War era can be summarized in “the four *bu* (不) and two *chao* (超)” policy: (1) do not carry the flag of socialism; (2) do not become the leader; (3) do not engage in confrontations; (4) do not make enemies; (5) go beyond ideological considerations, and (6) detach from concrete events<sup>10</sup>. According to these principles, China should not seek to replace the Soviet Union, should not become the leader of the third world countries, not seek confrontation with Western power and not get involved in conflicts, should not interfere in internal affairs of other countries, but engage them regardless its ideological orientation. A foreign policy guided by these principles allowed China, on the one hand, to focus on domestic priorities such as the economic growth and social development, and on the other hand, to develop worldwide cooperative relationships which served to overcome decades of international and economic isolation by gradually attracting and allowing foreign investment in China. In this regard, the “open door” policy managed to expand and diversify China’s foreign trade through the acceptance of foreign capital inflows and the establishment of an export-orientated economy model.

Therefore, the most noteworthy element attributable to Deng’s strategic thinking in foreign policy was the understanding of the inexorable link between peace and development. Indeed, an international scenario defined by the absence of war would provide China with a favorable environment to concentrate its efforts on its reform agenda and economic growth. This strategic thinking shows a shift from the dogmatic orientation that characterized Chinese foreign policy during the Mao’s era to a pragmatic foreign policy now centered on China’s socioeconomic development. The “peaceful development” (*heping fazhan* 和平发展) strategy was a strategic choice made by Deng Xiaoping<sup>11</sup> to be later introduced by the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2003 during a speech at Harvard University. In his speech, Wen referenced “China’s road of peaceful rise and development”<sup>12</sup> to refer to the essence of China’s process of opening to the world. The “peaceful development” strategy was later formalized as a policy in 2005 through the release of first China’s *White Paper on Peaceful Development Road*. The link between peace and development is evident in the text itself:

To take the road of peaceful development is to unify domestic development with opening to the outside world, linking the development of China with that of the

rest of the world, and combining the fundamental interests of the Chinese people with the common interests of all peoples throughout the world. China persists in its pursuit of harmony and development internally while pursuing peace and development externally; the two aspects, closely linked and organically united, are an integrated whole, and will help to build a harmonious world of sustained peace and common prosperity<sup>13</sup>.

By this time, China had become a prosperous country with a sustained double-digit economic growth, a recent member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), a country engaged with more than 40 nations in diplomatic relations, and taking a more active role in regional and international organizations. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, as a regional initiative led by China and Russia. The launching of the SCO showed China's will of discussing military and security themes at a multilateral level, which the Chinese government had not been willing to do before. Consequently, China's economic growth led to the need of having a better position for China's diplomatic voice and intensify its international profile. In this respect, one may understand on the one hand, that Hu Jintao started to implement a more proactive and pragmatic foreign policy, which marked the transition between the KLP and the SFA strategies, and on the other hand, that this transition also responded to the strategic thinking of linking international peace and domestic development. However, this time China could no longer be a spectator of the international stage but should rather become an actor with a more active role to ensure a peaceful international environment.

Although President Hu followed the KLP strategy, China's foreign policy turned to a more assertive approach to meet its growing power aspirations by the logic of protecting its "core interests". Hence, issues such as China's national security, national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the continuing stable development of China's economy and society were set as core interests. Based on these principles, China made first-time objections about the Obama's administration selling arms to Taiwan; criticism regarding President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2010, and stated the maritime territorial claims over the South China Sea. In 2011, the "core interests" were formally included in second *China's Peaceful Development White Paper*. In the section *China's Foreign Policies for Pursuing Peaceful Development*, it is established that: "China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development"<sup>14</sup>. According to SWAINE, the use of the term "core interests" in official statements and its application to contentious policy issues "arguably signals an attempt by a stronger, more assertive Chinese leadership to elicit greater respect and defense from other nations for China's position on those issues"<sup>15</sup>. Having included security issues as "core interests" alongside the established national interests of sustainable economic and social development, not only denotes the rise of a more confidence and assertive China in

terms of its international role, but also indicates the beginning of a transition to a forthcoming adjustment in China's foreign policy approach.

Even though it is difficult to know exactly the moment in which China shifted from the KLP to the SFA strategy, there are some facts that, according to YAN<sup>16</sup>, questioned the effectiveness of the KSL strategy and contributed to its change. Firstly, after the Olympic Games in 2008, the international community perceived China's passive attitude as a lack of responsibility and willingness to take a more responsible role over security issues that did not directly involve China. Due to this, China faced an increasing pressure to take a more active role in the international realm. Secondly, the implementation of the Rebalance to Asia-Pacific Strategy by the Obama presidency in 2011, which defied the belief that the KLP strategy has prevented the US from considering China as a strategic competitor in the region. One immediate reaction within the Chinese academic circles was the publication of the article "*Marching Westwards*": *The Rebalance of China's Geostrategic* on Global Times in 2012 by the renowned Chinese scholar WANG Jisi. In his article, WANG outlined China's "March West" (*Xijin* 西进) strategy, by suggesting the revival of the Silk Road aiming at establishing a significant bridge of commerce and communication between Eastern and Western civilizations<sup>17</sup>. Wang's article should be considered as the precursor of the BRI while showing the strategic nature of this initiative which among other things will counteract the presence of US in the Chinese periphery (*zhoubian* 周边). Both facts led Chinese foreign policymakers to consider an adjustment of China's foreign policy strategy.

### **The Emergence of the SFA Strategy. Rupture or Adjustment?**

The implementation of the SFA strategy evolved gradually. The first signs of its adoption can be traced in some official statements released between 2013 and 2014. Among them, there is the speech of the Chinese Foreign Minister –Wang Yi, at the Second World Peace Forum in June 2013. In this forum, Wang addressed the recognition of China as a significant international actor and therefore the role that Beijing is expected to play in global affairs and the impact of its foreign policy in the world. Referring to President Xi Jinping, Wang stated that "on the diplomatic front, it has taken new measures, put forward new ideas and presented a new image. China's diplomacy in the new era has taken on a more global perspective with a more enterprising and innovative spirit (...) [China] is actively exploring a path of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics"<sup>18</sup>. This statement highlights China's reflection on the structural changes in the world and the need to develop a new approach for foreign policy and diplomacy to cope with these changes, now from a major-power perspective. This perspective portrays China as playing an active and responsible role in the handling of international issues, and its foreign policy and diplomacy transitioning "from passively adapting to changes in the external environment to actively shaping the external environment. In other words, there is a shift from 'responsive diplomacy'

(*fanying shi waijiao* 反应式外交) to ‘proactive diplomacy’ (*zhudong shi waijiao* 主动式外交)”<sup>19</sup>. Another noteworthy aspect of Wang’s speech is the recognition and positioning of China as a great or major power, which has never happened before within the former generations of Chinese leadership.

Notwithstanding this new trend in China’s foreign policy, it should be noted that many elements of the KLP strategy persist in Wang’s speech, which yet again points at an adjustment rather than a rupture between the KLP and SFA strategies. On the one hand, China still regards itself as a developing country while at the same time it self-recognizes as a major power. Wang’s speech pointed out the “paradoxical phenomenon” of being the second world largest economy in aggregate terms but not in per capita income, which still places China as a developing country. Consequently, “when conducting diplomacy, we must first and foremost stay focused on serving and promoting the central task of development. We must work more vigorously and effectively to create a sound external environment for completing the building of a moderately prosperous society”<sup>20</sup>. This declaration recovers one principle that has been present in China’s foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping: the link between a peaceful international environment and domestic development. In light of this, China’s peaceful development strategy has not been left behind, on the contrary, it remains of great importance within the strategic thinking of the new leadership. On the other hand, that the new leadership endorses Hu Jintao’s logic of protecting China’s “core interests” as a pillar of its foreign policy: “In the new era, China will stay committed to its independent foreign policy and firmly safeguard national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in its diplomacy”<sup>21</sup>. An article of Yang Jiechi, Chinese State Councilor and Xi Jinping’s top diplomat<sup>22</sup>, also claims that China’s foreign policy under Xi’s era will balance China’s domestic and international considerations; it will realize the “China Dream” through the peaceful development path while acknowledging the importance of having a stable international and neighboring environment. Furthermore, China’s commitment of bringing forth a “mutually beneficial strategy of opening up while resolutely safeguarding China’s core national interests”<sup>23</sup>, also demonstrates an adjustment, not a rupture between the KLP and the SFA strategies.

Although Xi Jinping’s speech at the Periphery Diplomacy Conference in October 2013 asserts some features of the SFA strategy, it is rather his speech at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs<sup>24</sup> held in November 2014, that provides the first comprehensive presentation of the essential elements that comprehend the SFA strategy. As an overarching framework, Xi stresses that China’s diplomatic efforts seek to achieve China’s “Two Centenary goals”: “To finish building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the time the CPC celebrates its centenary in 2021 and to turn the People’s Republic of China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by the time it celebrates its centenary in 2049”<sup>25</sup>. More precisely, the first centenary goal aims at doubling China’s 2010 GDP and per capita income, and the second one aims to

elevate China's per capita GDP to the level reached by moderately developed countries. Once again, the link between China's diplomacy and the completion of China's domestic imperatives becomes evident as a part of the non-variable principles of the Chinese foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping.

Xi Jinping's speech articulates the prevailing trends of China's foreign policy as well as announces new concepts and elements that from our perspective show an adjustment between the KLP and the SFA strategies. For instance, Xi introduces the concept of a "new type of international relations", a notion which is regarded by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS)<sup>26</sup> as a "grand concept that defines the guiding principle for China's diplomatic theories in the new era"<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, the Chinese President emphasizes China's efforts to build a "new model of major-country relations". This idea was presented in 2013 to advance a new form of relations between great powers, especially China and the US. Regarding the elements that China's assertive foreign policy approach entails, it is noteworthy the assertion that "China has entered a crucial stage of achieving the great renewal of the Chinese nation [therefore] China should develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a major country"<sup>28</sup>. This not only shows the intention of adjusting Chinese foreign policy in order to cope with the challenges stemming from the "changing international architecture"<sup>29</sup>, but also China's self-recognition as a great power. In relation to this issue, the notion of the interdependence between China and the world suggests that China's development is closely linked to the international community and it is consequently being affected by it. It also suggests that China is increasing its capacity to influence the world regarding global governance through its foreign policy actions. Indeed, the latter can be considered one of the new trends in China's assertive foreign policy. While in the past the focus was set on providing a suitable external environment for economic development, now China seeks to fulfill its development but also increase its worldwide political influence.

During his speech, Xi Jinping also addressed the characteristics of China's future diplomacy: (1) fostering a new type of international relations emphasizing the win-win cooperation approach in every aspect of China's international relations (political, economic, security and cultural); (2) democratizing international relations; (3) promoting neighborhood and multilateral diplomacy; (4) building a firm framework of major-country relations; (5) expanding and strengthening cooperation with major developing countries; (6) building a global network of partnerships by abiding the principle of non-alignment; (7) working on the reform of the international system and global governance by increasing the representation of China and other developing countries; (8) protecting China's core interests; (9) enhancing CPC central leadership on foreign affairs<sup>30</sup>. These features are further reinforced by Wang Yi's speech at the opening ceremony of the Symposium on the International Development and China's Diplomacy in 2014. Indeed, Wang presents these characteristics as "the new diplomatic theories and practices"<sup>31</sup> that China has been developing in foreign affairs since Xi Jinping came to power. Moreover, he points out that China's diplomatic undertakings

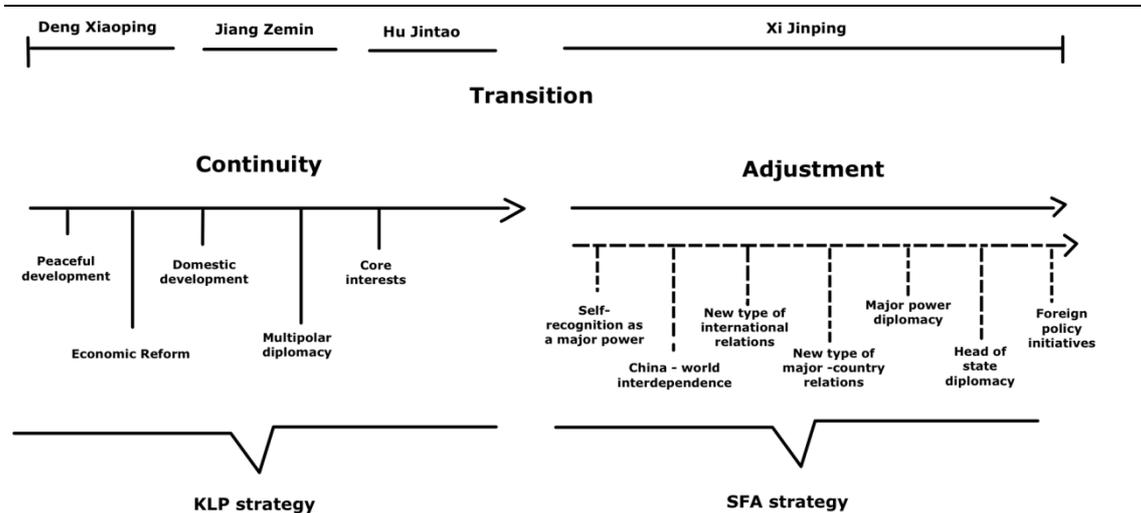
have created a favorable environment for China's domestic development. In this statement, Wang reaffirms the inexorable link between China's domestic politics and foreign policy, which constitutes one of the elements of continuity between the KLP and SFA strategies.

Chinese Foreign Minister also echoes Xi Jinping call for building a "new type of international relations" underpinned by the win-win cooperation model and a global network of partnerships. The former entails a "new approach to manage state-to-state relations in the contemporary world"<sup>32</sup>, while the latter is opposed to the concept of military alliance and aims at handling "state-to-state relations with a cooperative rather than confrontational, and win-win rather than zero-sum approach"<sup>33</sup>. An essential aspect of Wang's speech is the emphasis on some issues related to the Asian-Pacific region and China's increasing involvement in global issues. In this respect, some issues stand out, for example: the role played by China in the triple transition of Afghanistan, the negotiations on the nuclear program of Iran, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Syria crisis, the conflict in South Sudan, and the South China Sea issue. Furthermore, China has actively engaged in global governance issues through its active participation in regional and international forums. Undoubtedly, China's implication in all these matters shows the active, responsible, pragmatic and assertive nature of its foreign policy.

In addition to what has been previously exposed, Xi Jinping's leadership over diplomatic issues has been a significant sign of China's adjustment of strategy. He is personally involved not only in the foreign-policy making process but also in its implementation. Indeed, President Xi has been personally involved in planning and promoting "head of state diplomacy"<sup>34</sup>. Professor Baouhi ZHANG has claimed that "while Xi has demonstrated toughness in defending China's core interests, he has also shown himself to be an android diplomat who can pursue pragmatic foreign policies in multiple dimensions"<sup>35</sup>. Hence, Xi Jinping's leadership and personal implication in foreign policy can be considered as another new element of China's assertive foreign policy. Another trait of China's current foreign policy is the launching of unprecedented foreign policy initiatives and institutions such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The BRI constitutes a foreign policy initiative that "aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries"<sup>36</sup>. All in all, the comparison between the elements that have constituted China's foreign policy during the last four Chinese leadership generations suggests that there has been a continuity in the foreign policy strategy from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, a transition between Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, and an adjustment from the KLP strategy to the SFA since 2014 (see figure 1). This adjustment involves the continuity of some longstanding foreign policy features from the previous eras along with the inclusion of new concepts and elements such as those that have been analyzed in this section. As QIN has argued

“It implies the existence of both continuity and change, although the former is its main theme with regards to strategic goals, designs, and policies as a whole. Changes, however, do occur, mainly through issues perceived as relevant to core national interests”<sup>37</sup>.

**Figure 1- Continuity, transition and adjustment between foreign policy strategies**



Source: designed by the author

### The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and Xi Jinping’s Strategic Thinking

The foreign policy themes and initiatives stressed by Xi Jinping at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress held in October 2017 show the increasingly assertive nature of China’s foreign policy in the years to come. Based on Xi Jinping’s report one may understand that during the next five years China will follow a more assertive foreign policy approach that will seek to deepen the foreign policy actions implemented so far, aiming at turning China into a moderately prosperous society and developed country while increasing its worldwide influence. As we shall see further on, Xi Jinping’s report presents several assertions that confirm the continuity of some elements that have constituted China’s foreign policy during his first term, while incorporating others that show a more confident and assertive China.

#### Foreign Policy Issues

A noteworthy element in Xi Jinping’s report is the announcement of a “new era” for the “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”. The term has been used to denote the beginning of a new era with implications in several aspects of the country: modernization, rejuvenation, reform, governance, military, diplomacy and the Party. Concerning the implications for foreign policy, the declaration of a new era for China “makes clear that major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a

new type of international relations and build a shared future for mankind”<sup>38</sup>. Beyond this overarching goal that shows continuity with Xi Jinping’s first term foreign policy, two important implications can be observed. Firstly, China’s open intention and announcement to play a more active and significant role in the world. Regarding global governance, “China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, taken an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance (...) global peace and development”<sup>39</sup>. In a more straightforward statement, Xi describes the new era as “an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind”<sup>40</sup>. Secondly, the China of this new era is growing confidence on the world stage, and it is not shy about setting major goals and showing its ability to achieve them. This China is a major power with “an unambiguous desire to occupy a position of global leadership alongside the United States and other major powers”<sup>41</sup>. China’s growing confidence is also notorious in being presented by its authorities as a model for other developing countries. China offers its “wisdom” to these countries, as well as “approach” to solving the problems that the world faces and in doing so, accelerate its development. Neither of these instances represents and innovation in Chinese foreign policy after 2014; however, in this report, China shows a high level of confidence that stems from its outstanding capacity during the past five years of increasing its economic and military power as well as its worldwide political leverage.

Another noteworthy element of Xi Jinping’s speech is the emphasis placed on military affairs. He recalled the dream of building a powerful military which in the new era means to “build the people forces into world-class forces that obey the party’s command”<sup>42</sup>. China seeks a full modernization of its military in terms of theory, organizational structure, personnel, and weaponry by 2035, and aims to transform its armed forces into world-class forces by 2050. It is known that during his first term Xi Jinping reorganized China’s military, now he intends to go further through the reform of the career officers’ system and the military service system. This statement and Xi’s call for building artificial islands in the South China Sea have triggered some comments about China’s warning of having to gird for a possible conflict<sup>43</sup>. Although Xi Jinping has asserted that “a military is built to fight [and, that] our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its works and focus on how to win when it is called on”, he has also stressed China’s intention to follow a foreign policy of peace. This entails the use of diplomacy over military means in the resolution of international disputes. However, a distinctive trait of Xi Jinping’s strategic thinking relies on making equally important the goals of making China a rich country and a powerful military forces. His emphasis on military power and his tough position towards conflicts that involve China’s core interests marks a notorious difference from his predecessors<sup>44</sup>. In his report at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the Chinese President has claimed that China will never give up its interests and legitimate rights, and nobody should expect China “to swallow anything that undermines our interests”<sup>45</sup>.

That said, the link between shaping a suitable external environment through diplomacy and China's domestic development is still present as a principle that will also characterize Xi Jinping's foreign policy during his second term. Xi expressed that China "have made all around efforts in the pursuit of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, thus advancing China's diplomatic agenda in a comprehensive, multilevel, multifaceted way and creating a favorable external environment for China's development"<sup>46</sup>. As we have stated before, this is a Chinese foreign policy principle since Deng Xiaoping. Nonetheless, two elements signal a difference in how the new leadership perceives it. Firstly, that the external environment is characterized by complex global challenges that keep the world in a state of constant change. Some trends of these changes can be noticed in countries becoming more interdependent and interconnected, the international forces becoming more balanced, and peace and development being considered as irreversible trends<sup>47</sup>. Hence, Xi Jinping's report tackles in several instances topics such as the economic globalization, which China is fully committed to by promoting "trade and investment liberalization and facilitation (...) [and developing an] "open economy of higher standards"<sup>48</sup> to increase China's economic power and strength. It is worth mentioning that the rationale behind this statement relies on China's reaction to the protectionist position taken by the Trump administration. China is also aware of the destabilizing factors in this complex and changing external environment, including the disparities between rich and poor countries, terrorism, infectious diseases and climate change.

Secondly, that in this changing external environment, China might be taking advantages of the opportunities of the US growing loss of influence. It is true that China advocates for a multipolar world with balanced international forces, however, the fact that the US is losing its weight regarding global governance issues has opened a window for China to increase its international influence. As ESTEBAN points out:

Donald Trump's arrival to power has produced a deterioration in the international image of the US. China is mobilising all of the instruments of foreign policy to occupy the symbolic space which Washington has lost, especially in two domains: as the guarantor of global public goods and as a reliable and responsible partner in East Asia. In his principal foreign-policy addresses to date this year, Xi has repeatedly emphasised, if with few specifics, China's commitment to the maintenance of global public goods and, in more detail, to free trade and the fight against climate change. This movement forward by China contrasts, at least implicitly, with the weaker commitment of the US in these areas<sup>49</sup>.

Furthermore, Xi Jinping's report addressed some foreign policy principles and initiatives at the core of his second term. As regards foreign policy principles, a longstanding narrative is still present which encompasses the peaceful development, the "China Dream", "shared future for mankind", win-win cooperation, global network of partnerships, a "new type of international relations", major country relations and major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Concerning the foreign policy

initiatives, the Chinese President highlighted the importance of the BRI, which involves 68 countries along an area that covers 62.3% of the world's population, 30% of the world GDP, 55% of the world Gross National Product (GNP) and 75% of known energy reserves. The BRI aims at a \$900 billion scheme, and about \$8 trillion is set aside for infrastructure loans<sup>50</sup>. Until 2015, provinces and autonomous regions have invested in infrastructure planned for the BRI around 1.04 trillion RMB. In addition, the China Exim Bank and the China Development Bank had respectively financed 2057 projects in 49 nations and 400 projects in 48 countries<sup>51</sup>.

Since its launching in 2013, the BRI has become in China's foreign policy flagship. The call for other countries to join the initiative and jointly build the Belt and Road has been included in several official statements. Xi Jinping's report evoked this call while presenting the BRI as a platform for international cooperation: "China will actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development"<sup>52</sup>. Although the BRI is presented as an initiative that will foster international cooperation and trade by aiming at developing Eurasian connectivity, it is expected that as a foreign policy initiative it is linked to some China's domestic imperatives. With the deployment of the BRI, China aims at tackling some domestic challenges such as the disparity between its western and coastal regions, provide new investment opportunities for the state-owned enterprises, boost its economy and relieve its overcapacity problem, strengthen China's peripheral diplomacy and Xi Jinping's leadership. In light of this, the BRI can be considered as an instrument of China's diplomacy to dealing with China's said domestic challenges and, fulfilling the rise of China as a global power.

These innovative elements in China's assertive foreign policy are largely due to Xi Jinping's strategic thinking. Certainly, many of the principles in Xi Jinping's foreign policy represent a continuity of the foreign policy of his predecessors. However, Xi Jinping can be acknowledged for having managed to formulate coherent and strategic thinking in foreign policy. Indeed, the 13<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress celebrated on March 2018, included the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" in the same hierarchy of "Mao Zedong Thought" and "Deng Xiaoping Theory". Concerning foreign policy Xi Jinping has introduced the following concepts: (1) a "new type of major country relations" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*, 新型大国关系); (2) a "new type of international relations" (*xinxing guoji guanxi* 新型國際關係); and, (3) "major country diplomacy" (*daguo waijiao* 大国外交). To these concepts, we should add two key narratives that frame Xi Jinping's politics: the "China Dream" and the "community of shared destiny". Finally, through the vision and implementation of Xi Jinping's strategic thinking, China has managed to stabilize China-US relations, improve its relations with other major powers such as Russia and European countries, increase its relations with developing countries in Africa, Latin

America, and Central Asia<sup>53</sup>. Furthermore, China has hosted several important summits such as the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit; the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation; the 9<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit and more recently, the Boao Forum for Asia. Over the past five years, Xi Jinping has visited 57 countries and received around 110 heads of states from all over the world<sup>54</sup>. On top of these visits, the visit to the North Korean leader stands out as it constituted not only Kim Jong-un's first foreign trip but also an important step to advance in the negotiations for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Undoubtedly, these diplomatic undertakings denote the assertive nature of China's foreign policy and new diplomacy pursuing through a more active role, enhancing China's worldwide influence.

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## Notes

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<sup>5</sup> According to SWAINE, in China, a source can be considered as authoritative when this is explicit enough to “speak on behalf of the regime”. Regarding foreign policy, this will include official statements issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spokesperson statements and daily press briefings, remarks from Party officials, and reports published by official newspapers such as People's Daily.

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- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
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