China's Foreign Policy Since 2012

A Question of Communication and Clarity

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Abstract: China's success in developing its economy since 1978 has been accompanied by an increasing geopolitical role. In recent years, this has been accentuated by the increasing confusion about the resilience of its own systems and global visions by the United States and its allies. China has never had a larger stage to exercise its influence and present its values and vision. It has created a set of narratives for its foreign policy that conveys this vision in ways which attempt to avoid normativeness, but assert China's legitimate interests. Nevertheless, a number of challenges have emerged for China in the past five years and these will continue shaping China's self-image and global role in the future.

Keywords: China's foreign policy; Xi Jinping; U.S.-China relations; EU-China relations; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In some ways, the foreign policy strategy that China pursued in the period over 2012 and into 2013 when Xi Jinping just took office can be

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characterized as an attempt to solve a central diplomatic conundrum arising from the previous era under Hu Jintao: how to convey China's intentions toward the outside world in ways which avoid being interpreted as assertive, but which are honest to China's aspirations to be a significant regional and global actor with its own unique diplomatic posture and set of objectives.

Evolution of China's Foreign Policy Posture

Since 1978, China has emerged from relative international isolation to increasing centrality and prominence. However, its posture over most of this period can be best characterized by the phrase attributed to Deng Xiaoping, which states that China needed to "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."¹ In addition to this was a continuing resistance to hegemony, a desire to avoid major power conflict, and, from the 1990s, a support for multipolarity.

There were three important contextual issues in the 2000s that need to be recognized. First, after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the country underwent a period of intense, high-speed growth, and an era of increasing openness to the global economy. Over the period from 2001 to 2012, China's economy quadrupled in size, despite the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and the ways in which it reduced the size of China's major export markets — the United States and Europe — and caused a reappraisal and readjustment of China's growth model. By 2012, China had become the world's second largest economy following the United States. Such economic growth implied that, regardless of its internal vision, China was a much more visible and prominent actor externally. Its wealth and trade strengths lent weight to its attitude on matters ranging from environmental issues to free trade and non-proliferation. The fact that it was the largest trading nation of over 100 countries by this period also brought inevitable geopolitical implications. China was known to be a wealthy power. Everyone seemed to be asking what it intended to do with that power.

¹"Deng Xiaoping 24 Character Strategy," GlobalSecurity, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm>.

In addition to this, there was a second related issue: the United States and others were more assertive in their demands for China to spell out its international visions. The most famous case in this regard was in 2005 when then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, stated: "We now need to encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. As a responsible stakeholder, China would be more than just a member — it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success."² This demand was later echoed elsewhere around the world.

The third issue was the moves within China to start filling this vision out in detail. There were two important steps here. The first was the construction of the notion of China's peaceful rise around 2005. This was associated with the influential Chinese scholar Zheng Bijian who became its prominent spokesperson. It at least contained recognition that for the Chinese, they understood that their country was rising to a position of prominence it had never experienced in modern history and that there needed to be recognition within China to the outside world of this. In more specific terms, there was the language of "core interests" used by then State Councillor Dai Bingguo in 2009. These were to "maintain its fundamental system and state security; next [to defend] state sovereignty and territorial integrity; and third [to support] the continued stable development of the economy and society."³

At the time when Xi Jinping came to power, the importance attached to how China better communicated its foreign policy posture was very clear. Since 2012, a number of new drivers arose contributing to this issue.

The first is the imperative to create a coherent internal and external narrative of what China's relatively newfound economic prominence meant. Peaceful rise had partly started to answer this, while it was often responded to by the question "peaceful rise to do what?" There was a hunger for more information about this question of what a region or a

²Robert Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility," U.S. Department of State (Archive), September 21, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

³Dai Bingguo, "The Core Interests of the People's Republic of China," *China Digital Times*, August 7, 2009, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/08/dai-bingguo-%E6%88%B4%E7%A7%89%E5%9B%BD-the-core-interests-of-the-prc/>.

world more organized around China and its vision might be. At a Politburo meeting early in Xi's period, there were reports that the leadership had recognized the need to "tell the China story." This meant creating a coherent, holistic narrative to achieve this end.

As part of this, there was clear recognition of the need to accept that China was an intrinsically global actor in ways that other powers might not be. China's domestic issues, such as its search for new momentum of growth, its battle over environmental issues, its pursuit for sustainability, innovation, and other key objectives, all carried global implications. China's slowing economy since 2013 and its reduced appetite for commodities had a knock-on effect on Australia and other trade partners in Latin America or Africa. China's support for the campaign to cut carbon emissions contributed to the success of the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference. Its partnership with the United States and European Union over forging a nuclear non-proliferation deal with Iran was also credited with huge contribution to the success of that effort. Since 2012, the direct link between the solution to the internal challenges China faces and partnership with the outside world has become clearer as it undergoes the transition to the economic new normal. For this reason, the references to the "Chinese Dream" since 2013 made that link implicit — it was a dream by China for the ways in which it might develop with the world outside engaging in and benefiting from that development. The inner and the outer are inextricably linked, and that is now accepted and embedded in China's domestic discourse.

Within this context, there is a clear understanding of China as having a role in the world, and one that is based on parity. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, a hallmark of Chinese diplomatic strategy since the 1950s, underlay the approach that China would work with other countries as a stakeholder, and a nation that appreciated the value of a global, rules-based and predictable trade and security system, but one which insisted on the critical importance of non-interference in each other's sovereignty, one which had a deep appreciation for each other's rights to articulate and then defend their core interests. The more popular expression of this was to strive for "win-win" defined full modernization as

China's domestic transformation since 2012 further highlights its global role that demands new foreign policy narratives.

a result of the centennial goals from 2021 onward, when China would become a middle-income country, which would enjoy the full restoration of its status and centrality in regional and global affairs.

Three Grand Narratives in the Era of Xi Jinping

Notably, there have been three principal “grand narratives” since 2013 within which Chinese foreign policy have been presented. These relate to the zones of important relations around the People's Republic in the 21st century: The United States in the first zone; the EU in the second zone, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the third zone. These spelt out a more communicative vision of how China viewed its own position, and the ways in which it wanted to be integrated into the world. At the heart of this was the notion of mutual respect and an adherence to equality.

Inevitably the most important and complex relationship has continued to be that between China and the United States. In almost every area, this is key to China which it continues to pay most attention to. This is about more than the fact that China and the United States have around USD600 billion in bilateral trade each year. It involves the complex interconnections between their two domestic economies, and the ways in which the U.S. military machine touches the very edges of China through the deployment of American troops in South Korea and Japan, and the ways in which U.S. treaty alliances spread from Australia and New Zealand, up through Malaysia and into the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan. The U.S. imperium therefore surrounds China, creating fears of containment in the 2000s, when Chinese analysts wondered when the country might ever, as the world's greatest emerging economy, have more strategic space around it unimpeded by American hard power assets.

In the early 2000s, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin referred to the following two decades as being ones of “strategic opportunity” in which the United States distracted by issues and responsibilities in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world was largely unable to focus solely on its relations with China. As Hillary Clinton stated when she was Secretary of State, the United States was an indispensable power. Nevertheless, it was a hard one for China to fully conceptualize its relationship with. The two nations were not natural allies, because of the very different nature of their political systems, but neither were they enemies. The talk of a new Cold War was

rejected. China and the United States, as one American observer put it, were neither friends nor enemies. Instead, they were “frenemies.” Their relationship was far more complex and nuanced than the strategic competition that the United States had experienced with the Soviet Union several decades before when it had been the second most powerful military in the world.⁴

The Chinese looked closely at the pattern of previous eras of competitiveness between emerging and dominant powers in the 2000s. Some noted the pessimistic statements of scholars like John Mearsheimer who predicted that an aspiring power was almost inevitably fated to clash with a dominant one.⁵ This was called the Thucydides’s trap, after the ancient Greek historian who wrote of the rivalry between Sparta and Athens, and the attempt by one to thwart the other before it became too powerful. Much thought was put into how to break this seeming pattern from history. When talk arose after the financial crisis in 2008 of a Group of Two (G2) where China was linked to the United States as the two great modern powers, Chinese leaders resisted, saying that the country was still developing, and that it was prioritizing its domestic challenges and their solution, rather than seeking to have a wider, more global role.

From 2013 on, the U.S.-China relationship has been framed from the Chinese side by the language of a new model of major-power relations. This was the formulation given by President Xi when he visited Sunnylands in California to have talks with then President Barack Obama that year. He stated at a press conference there that the two nations needed to build “a new type of relations between China and the United States which could avoid the traditional path of confrontations and conflicts between major countries.”⁶ What is striking about this formulation is its insistence on equality and parity between the world’s largest and second largest economies. This was reinforced by the statement that Xi went on to make: “The Chinese nation and the American nation are great nations and the Chinese people and the American people are great peoples.” There was no sense of

⁴Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

⁵John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

⁶“China, US Agree to Build New Type of Relations,” Xinhua News, June 8, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/08/c_132442379.htm.

deference, nor any assertion of superiority. China and the United States stood equal. A day later, Xi also stated that "the vast Pacific Ocean has enough space for two large countries like the United States and China." The notion being promoted then was not only abstract, but also involved actual physical territory and the assertion of parity of interests.⁷

In the second zone of interests stands the EU, China's largest trading partner after the United States, with 450 billion Euros of two-way trade in 2015. The European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the EU, and the People's Republic of China conferred diplomatic recognition on each other in 1975. Both were very different entities then. The EEC underwent transformation to the EU in 1993, and has enlarged from 9 to 28 member states by 2017. It also acquired more complex ambitions than simply being an economic partnership, with the *Maestricht Treaty* of 1993 and the *Lisbon Treaty* of 2009 creating social, political, and security strands for EU activity. For China too, 1978 marked a period of profound economic changes and a major readjustment of its relations to the outside world. Despite this, the legal basis of the relations between the two remains the 1985 "Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the European Economic Community and the People's Republic of China."⁸ This dealt only with tariffs and purely commercial issues.

After 1985, and particularly after China's entry into the WTO in 2001, the connectivity between the EU and China became much more dense and complex. Of greatest importance was the technology transfer that was undertaken by German and British companies. The EU therefore, despite its evident complexity and the fact that it is an assembly of 28 often very different and distinctive nation states whereas China is evidently only one, serves as a huge intellectual partner for China. It is in this realm that it has the most importance.

How to conceptualize the relationship with such a radically different and often perplexing partner for China? The EU's different vision of values and political principles was one among a whole menu of areas in which both sides often had problems understanding each other. In 2003 they

⁷"Chinese Leader Xi Jinping Joins Obama for Summit," BBC News, June 8, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22798572>.

⁸A summary of which can be found at <http://ec.europa.eu/world/agreements/prepareCreateTreatiesWorkspace/treatiesGeneralData.do?redirect=true&treatyId=341>.

upgraded their link to that of a “comprehensive strategic relationship.” But over matters like the failure of the EU in 2004 to 2005 to lift an arms embargo imposed in 1989 because of U.S. pressure, and the refusal to grant China market economic status a decade later, there were frequent tensions and misunderstandings. What language could capture this complex relationship?

Xi Jinping was the first Chinese head of state to visit the headquarters of the EU in Brussels in 2014. Speaking at the College of Europe in Bruges during the time of his visit, he talked a lot about how the two — despite their differences — were civilization partners. “We need to build a bridge of common cultural prosperity linking the two major civilizations of China and Europe,” he stated.⁹ This idea of China and Europe exemplifying different kinds of civilisation was also a continuation of the philosophy underpinning the encapsulation of U.S.- China relations as “a new model of major powers.” It was clearly predicated on equality and parity. “I hope,” he stated, “that Chinese and European students will perceive the world with equality, respect and love and treat different civilizations with appreciation, inclusiveness and the spirit of mutual learning.” Similar sentiments were expressed throughout the speech.

“Civilizational partnership” at least encapsulated something common about the two very different, but mutually important, powers. It recognized diversity, but also conveyed the fact that at the heart of the EU and China was a sense of a common civilization, culture, history and tradition. And it addressed from the Chinese side at least the common complaint that the EU often adopted a morally superior, sometimes lecturing and condescending attitude towards China. This was a request that it be taken as an equal.

The final zone of relationships was the one closest to China geographically — that covered by the BRI. In this area, China’s impact was the greatest, and its relationships complicated by layers of history, different phases of cultural influence, and competing strategic intentions. With Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia,

President Xi has managed to frame China’s key foreign relations into three zones with different languages.

⁹Speech by H. E. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China at the College of Europe, April 1, 2014, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/jd/t1143591.htm>.

South and North Korea, Russia, India and Pakistan, to name but a few of the regional players, China had a separate historic narrative and often conflicting and demanding relations. Its intentions in this region too were the most important to supply clarity about, with claims from the late 2000s onwards that it was being assertive, and aiming for a regional dominance that stood at odds with its language of supporting multipolarity and resisting hegemony.

Enjoying a benign and supportive regional context had been extremely important for China since 1978 after its reform and opening-up commenced. Having a story that it could tell its regional partners therefore about how they might work with it, and be able to benefit from its stronger economy and more prominent role was crucially important. From 2013, language about a New Silk Road started to appear, with Xi Jinping deploying this first on a visit to Central Asia that year, and then when going to Indonesia. The reference to the ancient Silk Road routes that had linked trade between the Han and Tang empires of two millennia to one millennium ago captured the interest of other parties in the region. This was developed into the idea of the "One Belt and One Road," expanding the original concept into not just land but maritime routes. Finally, the idea was encapsulated into the BRI. It was this that was discussed at a high-level summit in Beijing in mid May 2017.

The BRI was perhaps the most important of the signature narratives for foreign policy under Xi Jinping since 2013. It had to achieve a number of objectives. Firstly, it needed to address the criticisms of China having become a major economic player and an increasingly prominent geopolitical one and yet not expressing its vision about its regional and global role more clearly. Secondly, it had to avoid appearing normative and prescriptive, giving the sort of flavor to its foreign policy posture that might be labelled hegemonic and in the model of the United States. Thirdly, it had to be flexible enough to allow dialogue space for others. Finally, it had to avoid the trap of being seen as an attempt to stake out strategic space in direct competition to, in particular, the United States.

For these reasons, the BRI is an initiative, rather than a policy guided by fiat from Beijing. It is focused on economic cooperation, with, at its core, the idea that countries around China can benefit from thinking about new ways either of seeking mutually beneficial objectives by working more in its domestic economy for opportunities for growth there, or looking for

partnerships abroad. In particular, using the knowledge that China has accrued through the last forty years of development is important. No country has built more infrastructure, and in particular more high-speed railways, than China. It is the opportunity to share this, and to help with some of the massive infrastructure needs in the Asian region, that has made the BRI something that interests its neighbors.

The key statements about the BRI have stressed the importance of connectivity in terms of road, rail and sea links, Internet, information, and people-to-people movement. In addition to this, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) set up in 2014, at China's instigation, and with 56 founding member countries including the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Germany, and other developed economies, offers some initial capital. Chinese banks, and the New Silk Road Fund are also involved. Projects have already appeared in Indonesia and Pakistan. Even as far as the United Kingdom, and in the 16 Eastern European countries now captured in the "16+1," there have been seminars and talks on how to engage with the BRI idea.¹⁰

Changes in China's Global Image

What is the Chinese conceptualization of itself, and its role in the world? In the Maoist era, China had limited contact with the outside world. It had hardly any trade links, and in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution only one ambassador remained serving abroad — Huang Hua in Egypt. Since 1978, its global image has started to change, with more structured, positive engagement with the world around it. It sought to learn about industrial and technological modernization, sending delegations to the United States, Europe, Australia and Japan, to see how they had undertaken their own reforms. But the mindset of a country that had suffered greatly in the last century and a half and was still re-emerging remained despite these changes. The narratives of the century of humiliation from the First Opium War during 1839–1841 left a deep memory stain. As Christopher Coker said, Chinese views in the 1990s were still characterized by a

¹⁰The full text of the White Paper on the BRI is available at: http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

sense of grievance and resentment resulting from the experience of this history.¹¹

The sense that China was a big country, with increasing powers, but still laden with the image of itself as a victim, isolated and misunderstood because of its political model, lingered throughout the era of Hu Jintao from 2002 onward.¹² This created a cognitive dissonance. The world was presented with a country which seemed to become economically and militarily more powerful by the day, but used a language indicating a sense of diffidence. For some, this was indicative of a lack of candour. To them, China was feigning weakness even when it was strong as part of a strategy of deception.¹³ For others, it showed a contradiction within the country itself, unsure and unwilling to face up to the reality of its new prominence and influence and the potential responsibilities that flowed from that. Seen from this position, China was stuck between two different worlds, one in which it was still trying to modernize and become a great nation again, and another where it had already achieved this and was able to do and say things never possible before.¹⁴ Another group complained that China was solely focused on self-interest, the ultimate realist power, aiming to achieve its objectives, and relying on others like the United States to supply the security architecture and predictability it needed to continue its own development.¹⁵

These problems derived from the outside world making claims about China and how they believed it thought about itself and what motivations lay behind its behavior. In these discussions, China's own voice was often subdued, or simply silent. In the Xi era, however, we observe a more

¹¹Christopher Coker, *The Improbable War: China, the United States and the Logic of Great Power Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2015).

¹²This was best captured in William Calahan's description of China as a "pessoptimist" nation, one divided between optimism about the future tempered by pessimism over the searing experiences of its past. See William Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹³Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model will Dominate the 21st Century* (Basic Books: London, 2010).

¹⁴China's sense of its own weaknesses and vulnerabilities are best conveyed in Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵See Kevin Rudd, "U.S.-China 21: the Future of U.S.-China Relations under Xi Jinping," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 2015, <http://www.belfer-center.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Summary%20Report%20US-China%2021.pdf>.

proactive stance in saying how China regards its role in the world. One of the unexpected results of this is that it has raised awareness that, while some problems did come from China's relative silence before 2012, there were plenty of other issues that derived from the assumptions being made about China by the outside world. At the heart of this is the fact that up to recent years, the outside world has had a specific framework within which they see China: this is predicated on its being geopolitically weak, a nation which is perpetually in a subservient position. In recent times, however, the emergence of a China that is in many respects strong has forced a paradigm change. Suddenly, the world needs to have a framework where they can understand and interpret a strong, influential, and prominent China, but not a weak, low profile, and introspective one.

All of this has been compounded by the impact of the Great Financial Crisis, and events like the crisis of the Eurozone, and then the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President with his more protectionist, isolationist stance during the campaign. With events like the UK decision in the referendum to exit the EU in 2016, it seemed that the hitherto stable, highly predictable mature democracies were entering a period of volatility, and experiencing their own brand of resentful politics. The issue shifted from worrying about China and the challenges of its future development, to how the United States, the United Kingdom, and others could deal with problems in their own backyard — problems over inequality, frustration with their political systems, and demands for their own reform. In the 2000s, the United Kingdom, the EU, and others issued grand plans setting out ways in which they wanted to work with China to address the latter's domestic challenges. From 2010 onward, the issue became more about how they could set their own houses in order, rather than busy themselves telling others how they needed to change.¹⁶

China's global vision
has been better
articulated by a set of
diplomatic
discourses in the
Xi era.

¹⁶A good example of this is the British Foreign Office's white paper on China issued in 2009, *The UK and China: A Framework for Engagement* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2009), in which under four pillars of strategic interest, China's political and legal reform were taken as areas where the UK should work with China.

With the election of Donald Trump, and his vociferous opposition during his campaign in the United States against the action to mitigate the effects of climate change, and resist further free trade agreements involving the United States, suddenly it was China, not the United States that was occupying the position as chief defender of globalization. It was in this role that Xi Jinping addressed for the first time the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos in February 2017. The words he used there were unambiguous: "Any attempt to cut off the flow of capital, technologies, products, industries and people between economies, and channel the waters in the ocean back into isolated lakes and creeks is simply not possible."¹⁷ These ideas would have once been most likely to be stated by an American President. In 2017, China had become the most important defender of action against climate change, the most powerful supporter of free trade agreements, and a committed partner in non-proliferation moves — for example, just witness its work with partners to deliver the deal to freeze nuclearization with Iran in 2015.

The language of the Xi era has therefore been radically different in communicating China's ideas about its global role than those prior to it. There is now in 2017 more space than ever before for China to present its vision of how it wants to work in the world along with a wider and more receptive audience. The language that China uses is also much clearer than ever before about the ways it sees its geopolitical position, and how the surrounding world might best engage with it. This is a different sort of diplomatic discourse and also recognition that China now occupies a position more different than ever.

Challenges Ahead

For all the positives, there are a number of challenges that have emerged for China in the past five years which will remain salient in the future.

The first is the fear by China of overreach, and/or of being pushed through the changes in the rest of the world into a position of responsibility it feels unprepared for and does not wish to currently be exposed to.

¹⁷"President Xi's Speech to Davos in Full," World Economic Forum, January 17, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>.

With the United States under Trump, and with the EU still battling the challenges of the Euro crisis, the Brexit, and refugee issues, China's apparent stability and predictability have become more important than ever before. But China is aware of its domestic challenges, and of the need to undertake its own internal reforms. Being involved in issues from the Middle East to Africa and Latin America, in the ways in which the United States is, is evidently not part of the Chinese vision. It does not feel equipped, nor sympathetic, to the idea that it should model itself as a new imperium. Its role, it feels, is a more consensual one. But the possibility that Trump will cause the United States to scale down its security commitments in areas where China needs stability do necessitate the possibility that, unwillingly, it may have to take a position on issues it once left well alone. The Middle East, where half of China's imported oil needs come from, is perhaps the most dramatic example. Instability here is endemic, but also something that China has increasing exposure too. Xi Jinping himself visited the region in early 2016. There are plenty of other areas where China will increasingly be pressurized to become more deeply involved. The increase in its risk exposure is inevitable.

Secondly, with the lack of confidence by the United States and its allies in the robustness of their own systems, and the risk of them becoming more introspective and isolationist, suddenly the interest in what sort of alternative values and operations system China might offer has increased. The notion of a China model of development promoted in the last decade by analysts like Joshua Cooper Ramo

or the political scientist Daniel Bell was something that was less popular inside China than outside it. For many Chinese officials and academics, the Chinese experience was a unique model, one tailored to Chinese conditions, and therefore not easy to duplicate elsewhere. Everyone had to take his or her own developmental path. There was no template for this being forged for export in Beijing. Even so, with the reduction of U.S. influence and the sense that space was opening up for China, the imperative to spell out a Chinese vision of global order intensified. The questions of whether China was a status-quo power, happy to preserve the global rules-based trade and finance system, or one that sought to challenge, change and transform this

China needs to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding when delivering new narratives to the outside world.

became more important. There was no consensus outside of China on what the answer to this question might be.

Thirdly, the largest question of all also continued to cause consternation: when people asked, what does China want? The answers ranged from those who felt it wanted regional dominance, to those who saw it has a design deep into the future for global power and reach. Chinese leaders themselves resisted being characterized as wanting anything except mutual benefit and a world of equality and win-win gains. But this answer seemed too placatory for those keen to identify Chinese hawkishness, or an aspiration to eventually replace the Pax Americana with a Pax Sinica.

Apparently, the greatest challenge since 2013 is to clear away ambiguity both inside and outside China about what its real intentions might be, and how it enjoys and develops the new space opening up around it. Some fear that Chinese ambitions to finally emerge as a "rich, strong country" might tempt it into overreach and adventurism. Its actions in the South and East China Seas, therefore, are watched very closely, as are its operations in Africa, Latin America, and further afield. The interpretation of these involves both the actor, China, and those observing it, the wider world. The space for misunderstandings is huge. Chinese newness as a global actor, and the unique attributes it has politically and in terms of its own identity and its historic roots, only accentuates these challenges. A major challenge of the last few years has been removing lack of clarity and possible areas for misunderstanding of its motives and its understanding of the role it can play in the world. It is one that China has so far managed to deal with. New narratives, a new strategy of communication, and increased space for China to operate in the world in ways that allow engagement by others define the era from 2013 on. These are features that are only likely to continue over the next few years as China travels toward achieving its first centennial goal in 2021.