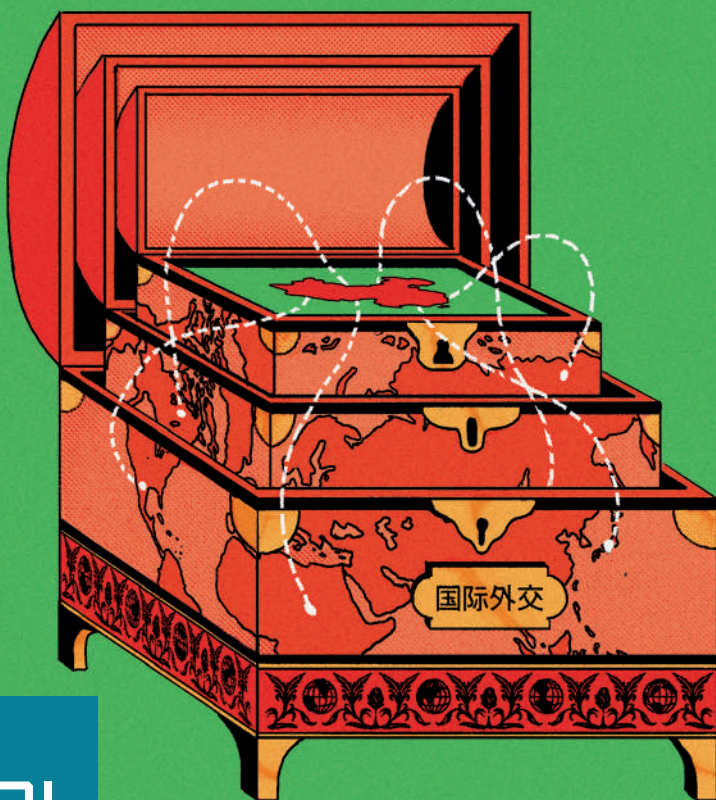


# CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICIES TODAY

## WHO IS IN CHARGE OF WHAT

edited by **Axel Berkofsky** and **Giulia Sciorati**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI



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# Table of Contents

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Introduction	
<i>Paolo Magri</i> .....	7
1. The Party-State Dichotomy: Convergence and Divergence in China's Foreign Policy	
<i>Niklas Swanström</i> .....	13
2. Xi's Foreign Policy and Partial Collegiality	
<i>Hongyi Lai</i> .....	31
3. China's Decision-Making System and Interest Groups	
<i>Yanzhuo Xu</i> .....	53
4. The Military Clout of China's Foreign Policy	
<i>Flavia Lucenti</i> .....	69
5. Chinese Companies Have a Say on Foreign Policy, Too	
<i>Alice Politi</i> .....	87

6. A Three-Pronged Foreign Policy  
in the New Era  
*Axel Berkofsky, Giulia Sciorati*..... 109

About the Authors..... 127

# Introduction

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In the decade since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, China's foreign policy has witnessed a significant change, from a defensive to an assertive approach. For decades, while spurring economic growth, Beijing worked to integrate into the liberal international order and present itself as a peacefully rising power. While some elements of this "peaceful rise" narrative persist to this date, under President Xi Jinping's leadership, the country has been projecting the image of a more powerful nation in the international arena. And although Xi's strategy aims to reassure other nations that Chinese intentions are benign, he is also attempting to create a global system that is more favourable to his country's interests. In essence, Xi has shown he is unwilling to adapt passively to the existing order created by Western powers.

The Ukraine invasion is a case in point. The Beijing administration has refused to formally condemn Moscow's actions and to offer solid diplomatic support to the West. This is in line with Xi's global strategy, whereby Beijing has forged stronger ties with countries that support its objectives in international institutions and agree to call for change in the global order dominated by Western powers – a key partner being Russia. However, while Russia has proved to be a key supporter of China's global agenda in recent years, this partnership is risky for Beijing's international relations. In this specific case, Beijing's unwillingness to condemn the invasion of Ukraine has spurred the development of a Western bloc that

is more united and critical of China, while some Asian powers also appear to be accelerating their attempts to reduce their dependence on Beijing. China now faces the arduous task of “saving face” internationally while, at the same time, pursuing a more active and assertive foreign policy for which Moscow’s support remains paramount.

Closer to home, China has tried to consolidate its influence in the Indo-Pacific region by deepening its regional partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and offering alternatives to US-led initiatives, especially the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the AUKUS pact, through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Similarly, Beijing has attempted to rebalance the relationship between European countries and the United States via other trade and cultural agreements.

Xi’s foreign policy has thus emerged as being characterised by more significant frictions with Western powers in matters considered “core issues” for China—above all, territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Under Xi, responses to criticism over human rights violations in Xinjiang have been harsh, with China imposing sanctions against Western companies, research institutes and individuals. A less direct – but still similar – approach has been used against states voicing support for Hong Kong’s or Taiwan’s claims. In the same vein, during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and with China’s reputational damage growing worldwide, diplomacy in Beijing has assumed more colourful tones in what scholars have dubbed the birthing moment for “wolf warriors”.

Given this newfound approach to foreign policy, maintaining positive diplomatic relations with China implies that its core interests need to remain a central consideration. Beijing’s relations with partners such as the European Union, Japan and South Korea continue to be safeguarded as much as possible, despite their contrasting political ideologies. However, the country’s foreign policy also includes economic goals. Indeed, one of China’s significant challenges is pursuing a more active



foreign policy while maintaining open and solid economic relations with the West.

Rooted in these and other considerations, the Report examines China's current approach to foreign policy and the drivers of the country's dramatic shift away from tradition. The study complements theoretical analyses on the inner workings of Beijing's foreign policy decision-making processes with empirical evidence drawn from China's stance towards the Russia-Ukraine war and foreign conflicts in general.

In the first chapter, Niklas Swanström walks us through the numerous state and Party agencies influencing China's foreign policy process today, challenging the oversimplified notion that the country operates through an unwaveringly unitary front. The author considers the sub-groups that lobby China's foreign policy-making, at the same time pointing to the role played by Xi as an influential actor detached from the state and the Party. Swanström underscores that, after Xi's reforms, the Communist Party of China (CPC) continues to trump the state when foreign policy is involved, but warns that the extent of the Party's control over foreign policy actors is limited and that the current frenzy for centralising power is counterproductive.

The second chapter expands on Xi's impact on China's foreign policy process. Hongyi Lai recognises the President's unique imprint on the country's decision-making, while identifying the transmission of Xi's goals and style to the highest levels of the country's diplomatic force. This element ensures that some form of collegiality remains in the foreign policy process. According to Lai, this collegiality still plays a crucial role in foreign policy deliberations – especially in critical cases like the Ukraine invasion – thus constituting a limit to Xi's power centralisation.

The subsequent chapter unpacks the role and status of the interest groups identified by the previous authors, arguing that three macro-categories make up China's overall foreign policy process. According to Yanzhuo Xu, foreign policy-making in fact consists of foreign policy decision-making, policy suggestion and policy implementation. While the first is

ascribed to the centralisation processes of Xi's presidency, policy suggestions and execution are considered moments during which stakeholders have a say in how foreign policies unfold. However, the author argues against those studies that treat the foreign policy process in China as a form of bargaining between interest groups, tracing foreign policy back to the country's decision-making system.

Following up on Xu's argument, Flavia Lucenti and Alice Politi detail two specific interest groups. In particular, Lucenti analyses the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a stakeholder traditionally involved in how foreign policy decisions are taken. The author traces the different reform phases through which the PLA acquired interest-group status throughout history, focusing on the Central Military Commission and the impact of Xi's recent power centralisation efforts on the military's ability to continue playing this particular role. Lucenti concludes that military renovations have drastically diminished the extent to which the PLA continues to have a say in foreign policy.

Politi, in contrast, investigates the role of Chinese private and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in foreign policy decision-making. The author builds her argumentation on the notion that today China's leadership is forced to coordinate a wide array of actors pursuing at-time-conflicting interests. In contrast with Xu's rebuttal of bargaining between interest groups, Politi argues for foreign decision-making processes to emerge from a negotiated consensus among different stakeholders. To support her argument, the author stresses, first, the structure of SOEs and their commercial interests as factors that are crucial in supporting the country's international economic goals and, second, the minor but key role of private companies in sustaining the country's economic growth and the related supervision they are subjected to from the Chinese government.

Lastly, based on the work presented by previous contributors, Axel Berkofsky and Giulia Sciorati, draw some conclusions on the main characteristics of China's foreign policy today,

which the authors argue will be decisive in shaping China's future stance. Berkofsky and Sciorati's chapter plays on the two authors' different perspectives, highlighting three aspects of the country's foreign policy – namely activism, compliance with the baseline and predominance of publicly voiced strong opinions – as the elements that are primarily bound to affect the country's foreign decision-making processes especially after the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, the authors suggest that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has been a critical juncture in the evolution of China's decision-making system, as the war has uncovered the structural weaknesses of this centralised system that merely echo domestic status-quo opinions.

*Paolo Magri*  
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