

The Past, Present and Future of People's Republic of China's Diplomacy

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Abstract

China's diplomacy has become an increasingly important factor in post-Cold War international affairs. In fact, China is more actively extending its power to Central Asia, Western Asia, even Turkey, through its "Belt and Road Initiative," which has changed the balance of power in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean.

This article discusses the features of the People's Republic of China's diplomacy. Currently, the PRC's diplomatic goals has become to contain Taiwan, seek control of international organizations, win other nations' support, let the world understand the superiority of the Chinese Communist system, and support specially favored countries. In order to overcome China's progress and threat, I argue that the United States and its allies should face the fact that the PRC's diplomacy has created its own unique value, which is attractive for many countries in the world. Therefore, the United States should increase its assistance to other countries and re-evaluate its "strategic ambiguity" policy in the Taiwan Strait.

Keywords: The People's Republic of China's Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, Massive Propaganda, U.S. Asia-Pacific Policies, Strategic Ambiguity

I. Introduction

Since 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s diplomacy has had four features, which can serve as its diplomatic goals as well: first, to establish the domestic and international legitimacy of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s rule in China; second, to win other nations' support to CCP's policies; third, to underscore the superiority of PRC's political system; and fourth, to underpin communism. In this article, I will introduce these features, analyze the possible orientations of the PRC's diplomacy in the future, and provide some suggestions.



Figure 1. The Building of PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Source: "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," *People's Daily Online*, May 31, 2012, <<http://en.people.cn/102759/205143/7832550.html>>.

II. Being the Only Representative of China thereby Eliminating the ROC's Existence

The first goal of the PRC's diplomacy originated from the conflict over China's representation in the United Nations (UN), as the Republic of China (ROC) still existed on Taiwan. Therefore, the PRC kept working on being the only representative of China thereby eliminating the ROC's existence from international society through coercing other nations to withdraw their diplomatic recognition of the ROC, meanwhile removing the ROC's seats in international organizations. Through these actions, the PRC consolidated its international status while it lowered the morale and determination of Taiwanese under ROC rule. Isolating the ROC had detrimental effects. Without membership of international organizations, the ROC can neither effectively defend its interests nor join the international rules-based system; nor can it exercise any rights

to speak on international affairs. The ROC is also unable to build up effective military cooperation with other countries under its forced isolation.



Figure 2. Which Countries “Recognize” Taiwan in 2019?

Source: Political Geography Now, “Map: Which Countries ‘Recognize’ Taiwan in 2019?” September 23, 2019, *Political Geography Now*, <<https://www.polgeonow.com/2018/07/map-which-countries-recognize-taiwan.html>>.

Nowadays, one of the PRC’s diplomatic goals has become to seek control of international organizations. Through its constant efforts, the PRC already has an unprecedented influence to the UN and all other important international organizations; while the influence of the United States within international organizations is decreasing.



Figure 3. China's State Councilor and Special Representative Wang Yi

Source: David Brunnstrom & David Lawder, "China says has no intent to play 'Game of Thrones' but warns on sovereignty," *Reuters*, September 23, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUKL2N26G02O>>.

III. Win Support from Other Nations

The second thing that the PRC aims at is to win other nations' support. In the 1950s, when the PRC was inclining towards the Soviet Union, it gained a huge amount of refundable assistance, which laid the foundation of the PRC's industrial and military capacity. After a rupture between the PRC and the Soviet Union, the PRC has focused on winning support from third world nations, such as Albania and African countries. Therefore, although for years the PRC has been the second largest economy in the world, it still sees itself as a "developing country", which implies that the PRC speaks for developing countries, thereby winning support from anti-American countries on particular issues. As the proverb says, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The PRC's influence on Southeast Asian, African, and Latin American countries is increasing, too. Beijing is directly involved in these countries' mining and fossil fuel extraction through its financial assistance to national banks and sponsorship of

Chinese companies. At the same time, Beijing is also increasing its bilateral trade with these countries to improve their dependence on China while engaging these countries' politicians and local elites through its national banks, cross-national business networks, and locally established organizations. For example, in the 1997 Asian financial crisis and 2008 global financial crash, the PRC provided Southeast Asian countries with financial assistance and promised to keep the Renminbi stable in Southeast Asia. During this period of time, the PRC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed an agreement on trade in goods in 2004 to mutually eliminate the tariffs on more than 7,000 goods. Moreover, with the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in 2010, the PRC has gradually become the first or second trade partner of the main ASEAN economies.



Figure 4. The PRC's Premier Li Keqiang Attended the 19th China-ASEAN Summit on September 7, 2016

Source: "China-ASEAN ties heading for maturity," September 7, 2016, *ASEAN-CHINA FREE TRADE AREA*, <<http://www.asean-cn.org/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=183&id=335>>.

Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute surveyed the 10 ASEAN members'

research institutes, business, financial and public sectors, civil societies, and media to evaluate the influence of global powers on ASEAN for its 2020 report, and the result showed that the PRC's political and economic influence in Southeast Asia has been increasing. At present, the PRC is the most influential power on the ASEAN countries.

IV. Massive Propaganda

The PRC's third emphasis is to let the world understand the superiority of the Chinese Communist system through massive propaganda. In 2009, the PRC government decided to spend C¥45 billion, approximately US\$6.6 billion, to promote its audacious global "Grand External Propaganda (*Dawaixuan*)" plan (in full, "The Grand Strategy of China's External Publicity") to compete with western media "for the dominance over discourse." Since Xi Jinping has become General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, the CCP and the PRC government have increased their external propaganda. In August 2013, Xi formally proposed the slogan, "To tell China's stories well," when he moderated the National Conference on Publicity and Ideological Work. This aims to promote the CCP's arguments and establish the PRC's good "national image"; to offset the influence of negative news reports on China; to improve China's surrounding international environment; to make other countries' policy decisions be affected by China; to help promote the CCP's political perspectives; and to spread narratives good for the CCP.

V. Support Specific Countries

The PRC's fourth diplomatic goal is to support specific countries, such as North Korea, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Although the number of Communist countries have sharply decreased after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there still exists a living fossil in Asia—North Korea—despite the end of Cold War. North Korea is China's only military ally. As North Korea is reluctant to renounce its nuclear weapons, it suffers from the UN's comprehensive sanctions and therefore almost entirely depends on China's economic assistance.

There are several reasons that the PRC supports North Korea. Not just a buffer zone to keep, North Korea also signifies the legitimacy of China joining in the Korean War 70 years ago. China's support for North Korea also provides China a stake in

the affairs of the Korean peninsula. If North Korea continues to threaten regional security and stability with its nuclear weapons, China will acquire an additional diplomatic bargaining chip, as Beijing can leverage its influence on Pyongyang to make the United States and Japan focus their attention on the Korean peninsula.



Figure 5. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang Attend a Signing Ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, October 8, 2019

Source: Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Attempts to Balance Ties With China, US," *VOA NEWS*, August 27, 2020, <<https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-attempts-balance-ties-china-us>>.

China also supports Pakistan as a counterweight to India. Since 1948, there have been three large-scale wars between India and Pakistan. China has provided Pakistan with massive economic and military assistance, including the collaborative productions of MBT-2000 tanks and JF-17 fighter jets. In addition, China and Pakistan signed a nuclear collaboration agreement in 1988, and China may be an invisible supporter of Pakistan's nuclear weapons plan.¹ In a similar way, China's support of Cambodia is

1. 〈分析：中巴核能合作為何引起國際關注？〉, *BBC*, July 6, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2010/07/100706_analysis_china_pakistan_nuclear>.

assumed to be a counterweight to Vietnam's influence. Myanmar has also gained China's support, especially after Myanmar's military coup seized power from the democratic regime. China hopes to enhance its influence through its support these specific countries while highlighting the independence of the PRC's diplomacy.

VI. The Possible Orientations of PRC's Diplomacy in the Future

First of all, the PRC will keep its diplomatic containment of Taiwan. On March 26, 2020, the U.S. Congress enacted the *Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019*, which requests that the U.S. government support Taiwan to access its memberships in all international organizations without a requirement of statehood, as well as to be granted observer status in other appropriate international organizations. The *TAIPEI Act* also requires that the U.S. government should instruct its representatives in international organizations to advocate for Taiwan's membership or observer status through "the voice, vote, and influence of the United States." Moreover, the *TAIPEI Act* urges that in any bilateral or multilateral interactions with China, such as the U.S.-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue and Leaders' Summits, the U.S. president or the president's designees should speak for Taiwan's membership or observer status in international organizations described above.² However, progress is limited to the present, given the *TAIPEI Act* falls short of its binding power.

2. United States Congress, "Text - S.1678 - Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019," May 23, 2019, *United States Congress*, <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1678/text>>.



Figure 6. U.S. Senator Cory Gardner Speaks during A News Conference for *TAIPEI Act* in Washington

Source: "US lawmakers introduce TAIPEI Act," *TAIPEI TIMES*, September 7, 2018, <<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/09/07/2003699941>>.

Certainly, Taiwan's diplomatic space should not simply depend on the goodwill from the United States. Nevertheless, Taiwan's lacking of diplomatic progress will be an encouragement of China, as it can be identified as a diplomatic failure of the United States, at least the limits of American influence. In fact, the United States lacks space when competing with China and other countries in the field of diplomacy.

China will coerce other countries not to cooperate with Taiwan in any way it can. One of its means is to leverage its economic power. China is the largest trading partner of all Asian countries, including Japan and Vietnam, which have territorial disputes with China. While many countries, like the United States, those of the European Union, and the United Kingdom, condemned the Myanmar military coup and imposed economic sanctions on China due to China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Japan and other Asian countries have remained silence.³ Therefore, I assume that China is making use of these issues to observe and test the United States and

other western countries' attitudes to its behavior. Hence China can determine the limits of their toleration and its strategies in response, thereby practicing how China can respond western countries' sanctions accordingly.



Figure 7. The Chinese and Iranian Foreign Ministers Signed a 25-year Cooperation Agreement between the Two Allies in a Ceremony

Source: "Iran, China Sign 25-Year Cooperation Agreement," *VOA News*, March 27, 2021, <<https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iran-china-sign-25-year-cooperation-agreement>>.

The second thing that PRC will do is to keep working on other countries' support. As the United States is focusing on restoring the transatlantic alliance, which has been weakened during the Trump administration, China's influence in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa is expanding rapidly. For example, recently, China is promising Middle Eastern countries massive infrastructure investments, and it is actively intervening in the Yemen civil war and in the Palestine issue. On March 27, 2021, China and Iran signed the Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program, which will enhance their bilateral economic and security cooperation in the coming 25 years. It is noticeable that Iran is one of the greatest enemies of the United States. According to the *New*

3. 〈対中依存度が急増する日本に米中の踏み絵は踏めるか〉, *JBpress*, April 23, 2021, <<https://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/65052?page=2>>.

York Times (March 28, 2021), China will invest US\$400 billion over 25 years in Iran's infrastructure, including finance, energy, ports, railways, and 5G, in exchange of Iran's stable supply of crude oil and gas. Through the deal, China will expand its influence in the Middle East and diminish the United States' efforts to isolate Iran.⁴



Figure 8. Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine Arrived in Africa

Source: Chiponda Chimbela, "COVID-19 pandemic to transform China-Africa relations," *DW*, June 8, 2020, <<https://www.dw.com/en/covid-19-pandemic-to-transform-china-africa-relations/a-53724530>>.

COVID-19 vaccines are China's other diplomatic weapon. As of May 2021, there has been more than 45 countries using Chinese COVID-19 vaccines, and China has promised to provide about 500 million Chinese vaccines to the Philippines and the other 44 countries. Although Chinese vaccines are less protective than vaccines developed by Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca, they still can help many countries slow down their pandemic expansion and gain more time to wait for more effective western vaccines.

4. Steven Lee Myers & Farnaz Fassihi, "China, With \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>>.

China will keep strengthening its external propaganda to overseas Chinese and international society. The so-called “cognitive warfare” is an emphasis in the PRC’s diplomacy. Taiwan’s 2021 *Quadrennial Defense Review* indicates that the PRC’s cognitive warfare against Taiwan has three goals: in the political dimension, to reduce Taiwan’s international space, thereby forcing Taiwan to accept its political demands; in the economic dimension, to leverage China’s economic and trade advantages to win over Taiwan’s people and enterprises; and in the military dimension, to increase China’s naval and air operations in the Taiwan Strait and surrounding areas to show its military capability and expand its military intimidation of Taiwan through mass media and social media.

Last but not least, China will maintain its support of North Korea. Because of the Trump administration’s failure, the nuclear weapons crisis on the Korean peninsula has not reached any settlement. North Korea has been increasing its nuclear weapons continuously. Meanwhile, it has developed a set of ways for its survival. In the past, the United States hoped to induce North Korea to renounce its nuclear weapons through diplomatic recognition, security assurance, and economic assistance. However, as now the United States may lack of sufficient diplomatic credibility and economic resources to support such a strategy, China will fill the void by supplying North Korea to maintain its subsistence minimum.

VII. Conclusion: Things We Can Strive For

First and foremost, we should face the fact that PRC’s diplomacy has created its own unique value, which is attractive for many countries in the world. On May 4, 2021, Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State, was quoted by the *Financial Times* as saying that the United States is not intending to deter China, yet the PRC government is increasingly pressing domestically and pushing internationally, which makes the United States and its allies need to stand up and defend the rules-based international order.⁵

Blinken’s words are right. However, as China’s strength keeps growing,

5. Katrina Manson, “Blinken rejects claims of ‘cold war’ between US and China,” *Financial Times*, May 5, 2021, <<https://www.ft.com/content/f77604cd-cb6b-45df-a9ec-4f4b63959ad5>>.

diplomatically the United States can no longer ignore China's influence on other countries, and it should accept the trend that more countries will develop cooperative relationships with China in new fields, such as vaccines.

The United States should increase its assistance to other countries. In spite of the U.S. taxpayers' disagreement, to increase American influence in international society is one of the most effective ways to reduce the expenditure on China's warfare in the future. The U.S.' war on terror spent more than US\$3 trillion. Had the United States used one tenth of the expenditure on the war on terror to provide assistance to the countries that the United States sent troops to, their hostility to the United States could have been much decreased, and they would have been more willing to join the international order that the United States presides over; at least, there would not have been the cost in lives lost on the battlefield. If the United States offered a US\$10 billion loan to Taiwan or the Philippines to assist their self-defense, the U.S.' determination shown through such a loan would make China's less likely to launch a regional war because of the increase of Taiwan's or the Philippines' military capability. If the war were to happen, the United States may have to spend more than US\$10 billion in a week, not to mention the deaths and other economic losses.

Second, the United States has to re-evaluate its "strategic ambiguity" policy. The U.S. general perspective perceives that "strategic ambiguity" deters China from mounting an invasion of Taiwan, yet it cannot stop Beijing planning and preparing for an invasion of Taiwan in the future. Such an argument is only half-right: in the past, China did not invade Taiwan was because of its insufficient military preparation, not because of the United States' "strategic ambiguity"— China's military preparation is targeted on "to overwhelm possible U.S. military intervention." Beijing has already thought over its worst scenario: facing a comprehensive military intervention by the United States to defend Taiwan. In other words, while Beijing has already prepared for the United States' "strategic clarity," the United States is constrained by its own "strategic ambiguity", and China's diplomatic pressure therefore has only very limited impact in defending Taiwan.



Figure 9. PLA Marines in a Military Drill

Source: Guo Yuandan & Liu Xuanzun, “Rumored PLA drills plan on Dongsha Islands sparks fear in Taiwan,” *Global Times*, May 13, 2020, <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188267.shtml>>.

The Pentagon may have many confidential military operation plans and will use them when necessary. But their efficiency must be severely limited because the United States has never deployed sufficient troops in the potential battlefield (*i.e.* Taiwan and its surrounding maritime area) and conducted sufficient drills with Taiwan’s military to validate the feasibility and reliability of all the military operation plans for the Taiwan Strait.

In the regions that the United States provides security assurance— Western Europe, South Korea, and Japan—the United States frequently has military drills with its allies. These U.S allies are facing much less security threats than Taiwan, but they have obtained clearer security promises from the United States than those of Taiwan. Obviously, the greatest contribution of the PRC’s diplomacy to its military strategy has been that China makes every country take a “strategic ambiguity” policy on Taiwan’s security issues. The long-term strategic ambiguity will make every country more hesitant yet less prepared to support the United States in a fight against China when China launches attacks on Taiwan. These will be more likely to trigger wars, which every country is reluctant to see.

Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China, once said that he cannot pass the Taiwan problem onto the next generation;⁶ Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. Secretary of State, once claimed that China will not wait for long. In fact, the balance of power in the Asia Pacific region is changing fundamentally. With its growing economic capacity, China is sharply and quickly expanding its military capability and gradually expanding into the South China Sea, which has directly challenged the freedom of navigation of the high seas that the United States claims to defend. In recent years, China is more actively extending its power into Central Asia, Western Asia, even to Turkey, through its "Belt and Road Initiative", which has changed the balance of power in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean. At the same time, the PRC's diplomacy is working for China's objectives in every field. The situation is urgent, as the clock is ticking.

6. "China's Xi says political solution for Taiwan can't wait forever," *Reuters*, October 6, 2013, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-apec-china-taiwan-idUSBRE99503Q20131006>>.

