



# IDSS COMMENTARY

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# **CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA AND THE PLA'S NEW MISSION**

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## **Introduction**

An agenda of multipolarization with a new regionalism dimension has become evident in China's foreign policy. It is underpinned by a parallel shift in the mission of its armed forces from domestic concerns to one of ensuring national security against external threats. These are the two main findings gleaned from substantive discussions that I had with Foreign policy analysts during a three week tour of China from 11 July 2002 to 3 August 2002, in an IDSS programme to exchange views with major Chinese foreign policy institutes on major international and regional security issues. I also collected publications and conducted interviews for my research on the Chinese military. This report is a preliminary assessment of the two subjects: Chinese foreign policy and the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), based on conversations I had with government officials and analysts in Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai; and the PLA officers in Guangzhou, Xian, and Beijing.

## **Chinese Foreign Policy: What Agenda?**

Chinese foreign policy officials and analysts maintained that as China's policy agenda was dominated by domestic issues, its foreign policy was aimed at creating a secure and cooperative external environment in which domestic economic development could proceed smoothly. Even though the current world situation was characterized by unipolarity (or US hegemony), they said that China did not want to challenge the status quo; it had been quite cooperative, whether in dealing with the US, or with its closer neighbours such as the ASEAN. China had therefore been helpful in the US post-9/11 effort to "counter terrorism, recession, and proliferation." they claimed that both were also working together to ease tension on the Korean peninsula and in South Asia. Regarding ASEAN, Chinese officials suggested that China was passive and had no agenda, to the point it was being "dragged into" the multilateral framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). They said China had no ulterior intentions other than wishing that both China and ASEAN moved from "peaceful coexistence" to "peaceful coprosperity."

The image of an innocuous China so preoccupied with domestic issues that its foreign policy is merely a reactive one even in a world of unipolarity, raises interesting questions. For instance, such an image clearly contradicts the notion of "multipolarization" ("*duojihua*"), a term one encounters quite frequently in official Chinese official foreign policy pronouncements. Chinese analysts may wave aside such contradiction by suggesting that such notions imply less any policy prescription and more a normative condition to be desired in the long run. But a more careful reading of the Chinese analyses shows that *duojihua* does imply a conscious and deliberate Chinese

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foreign policy agenda. This agenda aims to “multipolarize” the US unipolarity, and is largely driven by a deep concern about the possibly diminished freedom of choice to advance Chinese interests in the face of expanded US influence in the Asia-Pacific region, or China’s “near abroad.” This is implicit in the statements of the Chinese analysts that Chinese diplomacy would shift gradually away from its old emphasis on relations with the US, to a new emphasis on relations with neighbours in South East Asia and Central Asia. It is clear that China would employ a strategy of “asymmetrical diplomacy” by exploiting its comparative advantages in physical proximity, levels of economic development, culture or ideology and historical legacy, to cultivate relations with neighbours. The aim is to counter-balance US preponderance so that Chinese influence would not be diminished by US unipolarity.

### New Regionalism

A central concept in this multipolarization agenda seems to be the “new regionalism,” which has two major components: a limited regionalism with regard to ASEAN, and a proactive regionalism toward Central Asia. Regarding ASEAN, China clearly prefers a low-key ARF that is confined to dialogue, rather than a highly active ARF that is involved in problem-solving. For instance, Chinese analysts point out that the ARF is not designed for solving problems such as East Timor and the Asian financial crisis, because it is too big and diverse, too vague in its goals, and its process too informal and slow. They also hope that the ARF continues to be driven by ASEAN, and seem quite concerned at the idea of opening the ARF chair to non-ASEAN members and allowing ARF to address non-ASEAN issues. It is clear that an ARF that is limited to dialogue and intra-ASEAN issues, and driven by ASEAN, serves Chinese interests well, because it could provide a platform for China to dispel the perception of a “China threat,” and allow China to exert more influence in it. But a highly institutionalised and effective ARF that would open its leadership to big powers such as the US and Japan and focus on non-ASEAN issues, might constrain Chinese influence, because it could “internationalise” issues such as Taiwan and the Spratlys of the South China Sea, thus complicating Chinese claims over these territories. Chinese analysts were quite frank to point out that they just did not want to see the ARF dominated by the US and Japan. Also China would support the ASEAN+3 proposal as long as it strengthened Chinese interactions with ASEAN, which contributed to regional co-prosperity, while excluding the US.

In contrast to the ARF, Chinese analysts seemed comfortable to see the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, which groups China, Russia, and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kirgystan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) become more institutionalised, and action-based, and not a mere dialogue forum. Although the SCO started as a confidence-building mechanism for discussing arms reduction along their borders, Chinese analysts pointed out that it had grown to become a substantial institution, moving from political cooperation (negotiating borders), to security cooperation (establishing a counter-terrorism centre, gathering and sharing intelligence on terrorism, and planning a multinational force and joint military exercises), and then to economic cooperation (joint exploration of energy and building oil and gas pipelines). One Chinese analyst went so far as suggesting that as Chinese power and influence grew, China might be more flexible with regard to the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference, and would consider committing troops in cross-border “counter-terrorism” actions within the SCO framework.

What accounts for the Chinese success in the SCO? Chinese analysts believed that such success could be attributed to the fact that the SCO had more concrete and less ambitious goals and its membership was limited, which made it easier to build consensus. But the most important reason, according to the Chinese analysts, was the absence of the US and Japan in the organization; as a result Chinese interests and concerns were much better accommodated. As the US became more assertive in Central Asia, it could be expected that China would employ the SCO more for the purpose of undercutting US influence in the region.

### Multipolarization

According to the Western understanding of multipolarization, it is a highly competitive and unstable situation where countries balance against the prevailing powers or threats for self-survival in an environment of anarchy. Chinese analysts, however, have a different understanding of the term. A multipolar world, they argued, was where no single country dominated, where all countries have a role to play, and where there was respect for diversity of cultures and political systems.

Such a definition seems quite similar to what is usually understood by the notion of multilateralism, rather than multipolarity, and it is quite remarkable that China has made the decision to work within the regional multilateral frameworks to address its concerns. On the other hand, the limits of China's "new regionalism" are also quite apparent. The central incentive that drives Chinese regionalism appears to be the need to counter-balance the US and Japanese influence in the region (associated with the "relative gain" problem of multipolarity), but not the care for smaller countries to address their concerns and solve their problems (related to the "equity" issue of multilateralism). Otherwise China would not have chosen two different standards for engaging the ARF, where the US and Japan allegedly might dominate, and the SCO where China apparently sets the agenda. Chinese analysts were quick to point out that US bilateralism and unilateralism undermined multilateralism in Asia. They were however slow to explain why Chinese bilateralism (over the issue of Spratlys, for instance) did not undermine multilateralism, but allegedly laid the basis for it; and how Chinese unilateralism over the issue of Taiwan took into account respect for diversity of cultures and political systems.

### **The People's Liberation Army: New Role?**

The impulse to "multipolarize" US unipolarity became more apparent when the discussion shifted from Chinese diplomacy to the Chinese military. Since 1996, the PLA has been obsessed about a US military intervention scenario in its hypothetical war over Taiwan; this had been reflected in the simulation games of the PLA command and staff departments and colleges and the National Defence University in Beijing, as well as in the PLA's major field exercises. The "preparation for military struggle" (implying a war over Taiwan against the US intervention) had brought about major changes to the PLA. These changes have raised interesting questions about our analytical assumptions about the PLA.

One such assumption is that the PLA agenda had largely been dominated by domestic concerns, but not national security, and this was mainly due to the fact that the PLA could trace its origin to the long years of Chinese civil war, that it was extensively involved in the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, and that it played a central role in saving

the Party-state from the popular rebellion of 1989. While such an assumption was largely true up to the late 1970s, it is no longer true for several reasons. First, the PLA has withdrawn from the societal politics of the Cultural Revolution, and has stayed away from such politics for more than two decades (with the brief exception of 1989). But more importantly, the 1985 policy to demobilize a million soldiers and the 1997 policy to reduce another 500,000 have led to the elimination of a large number of manpower-intensive bureaucracies, infantry units, and provincial forces, i.e., those that had the relative advantage in mass-based societal mobilization if compared to the technology-based services such as the navy, the air force, and the strategic missile force. One PLA senior colonel suggested that the next round of downsizing would focus on further streamlining and consolidating bureaucracies and military schools, but not the forces. He argued that the post-1997 force level and the type of technologies were neither sufficient nor appropriate for civil contingencies such as disaster relief and the societal intervention on the scale of 1989.

The second assumption is that the PLA was more pre-occupied with making profit through its extensive business networks, than preparing for a war against external adversaries. But the PLA officers maintained that as early as the 1990s, concrete measures had been taken to reduce and consolidate the army enterprises, and to insulate them from the command and operational aspects of the PLA, and since the 1998 CMC (Central Military Commission) decision to divest the PLA of business activities, hundreds and thousands of army firms, factories, and farms had been transferred to the central and local civilian entities. Major PLA institutions still retained their guesthouses and hospitals, which could utilize their excessive capacity to provide services to civilians. But these were also being phased out, owing to the “sourcing out” of some logistical functions. PLA officers now seemed content to enjoy the benefit of the increased defence budget, and be able to concentrate on military issues.

The third assumption is that the PLA leadership had been more interested in the succession-driven power struggle in the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) Politburo, than national security concerns over external threats. Some Western analysts argued that the PLA media had been quite active recently in propagating Jiang Zemin’s theory of “three representations (the CCP representing the most advanced productive forces, the most advanced culture, and the interest of the broad masses),” and that this showed that the PLA stood behind Jiang in his struggle to retain his positions and power, but not to retire in the upcoming 16<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress. But Chinese military scholars argued that non-PLA media had also been propagating Jiang’s theory; the idea was to codify the genuine contribution of the third generation CCP leadership to CCP history before its collective retirement, that the succession issues had largely been resolved and the transition would be smooth. They further pointed out that unlike the Cultural Revolution when the CCP leadership and the PLA leadership were highly intertwined, the current PLA leadership did not retain a seat in the powerful Politburo Standing Committee and therefore had limited influence over the CCP leadership transition. The PLA’s influence has largely been confined to narrower and more technical issues such as defence budget increases and national security affairs.

The fourth assumption is that the PLA leadership was highly divided between the political commissar who was more loyal to the CCP agenda, and the commander who was more committed to military professionalism, and that a vigilant political commissar kept a watchful eye over an unhappy commander to make sure the latter did not deviate from the CCP line. But PLA officers and scholars maintained that there was no fundamental

conflict between the two. First, they pointed out that the CCP line was for the PLA to “prepare for military struggle,” which did not contradict the PLA’s agenda. Second, they claimed that the commissar had been largely “internalised” into the PLA to share administrative responsibilities with the commander and to act as moral and discipline officer, which enabled the commander to concentrate on the command and operational aspects. This in turn would enhance and not hamper combat effectiveness. Moreover, they claimed that the commissar specialized in the “soft side” of information warfare such as psychological warfare and media/propaganda warfare, which also contributed to combat effectiveness. Finally, they suggested that PLA commissars and commanders received similar training in the functional and technical skills of the military profession, and therefore PLA officers were appointed regularly and alternately to both commander and commissar positions in their career path. As a result, they argued that the commissar and the commander were not competing against one another over different policy agendas, but rather complementing each other for the common purpose of enhancing the combat effectiveness of the unit.

The final assumption is that the PLA leadership was highly fractured, this time not along the commissar-commander divide, but rather by the highly personalized factions that cut across this divide. These vertical factions (each consisting of both commissars and commanders) could be based on pre-1949 field army/base affiliations, the experience of serving as personal secretaries of higher-ranking leaders, being children of higher-ranking leaders, old school ties, and provincialism. For pre-1949 field army ties, the PLA officers and scholars pointed out that few in the current PLA leadership ranks served in pre-1949 field armies. But more importantly, even though a major PLA institution such as a group army could be identified with a pre-1949 field army, major components of this group army (such as division, brigade, battalion, and even company, which originate officers to be promoted) might be meritorious units that came from other group armies that were eliminated in the 1985 and 1997 reorganization, and their backgrounds might have little to do with that field army. As for personal secretaries and children of higher-ranking leaders, PLA scholars suggested that their number was small, that they did not constitute a cohesive group, and that their chances of promotion might be hampered by an image of lacking independent commanding ability or of favouritism, even though some of them were quite capable and possessed leadership skills. As for school ties and provincialism, PLA officers believed they did not constitute a cohesive group that could influence policy, even though people sharing those ties did get together occasionally for a drink or a reunion dinner.

Most importantly, PLA scholars pointed out, long-term, personalized vertical ties had become increasingly difficult to develop and unnecessary, because institutionalising of major bureaucratic requisites to regularize personnel policy contributed to a higher level of mobility. These requisites included military school (re)education as prerequisite for appointment and promotion, service term requirement and age limit for promotion, regular vertical transfer (from commanding position to staff position at higher headquarters and *vice versa*), and regular horizontal transfer (from commander to commissar, from one major unit to another, from commanding position to military school as student or instructor, and *vice versa*). Constrained by these requisites, the incentive was not to cultivate personalized clique relationships between superiors and subordinates against other competing vertical cliques, but rather to develop good relations with colleagues at the same bureaucratic level, so that it would be easier to implement the policy handed down from the next higher level.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the discourse of the Chinese analysts that Chinese foreign policy has a conscious and deliberate agenda, which is to “multipolarize” the US unipolarity. This agenda is seen in the different attitude of the Chinese analysts towards the ARF and the SCO. Chinese analysts have strong reservations about further institutionalising the ARF from a dialogue forum to a problem-solving mechanism, largely because they are concerned about the possible prospect of the US and Japanese dominance over the ARF agenda, which would diminish Chinese influence. In contrast, they are quite comfortable to see the SCO become further institutionalised from a dialogue platform to an action-based organization. This is because China has largely dominated the SCO, where the US and Japanese influence is minimal. The impulse to “multipolarize” US unipolarity becomes more apparent when the attention shifts from Chinese diplomacy to the Chinese military. In the name of “preparing for the military struggle” against US intervention over Taiwan, the PLA is transforming itself from a manpower-intensive organization whose policy agenda is dominated by domestic concerns such as societal mobilization and business activities, and whose leadership is highly fractured, to an organization that is becoming more technology-intensive and more concerned about national security against external threats, and whose leadership ranks are less divided.