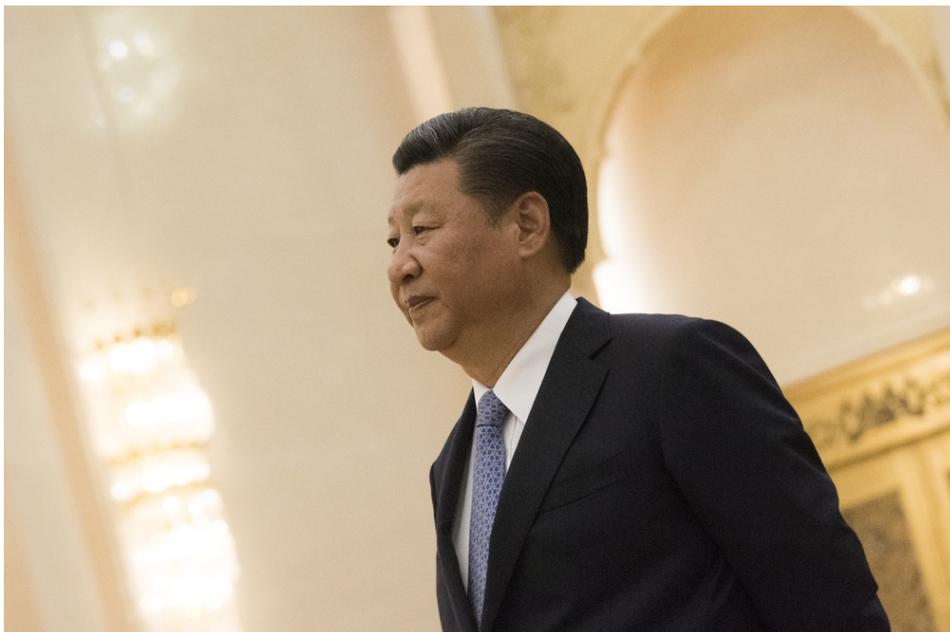


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FROM PRAGMATISM TO AGGRESSION

The Sources and Consequences of China's Assertive Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping

*Since the economic reform and open-door policy introduced in the late 1970s, China's foreign policy had been characterised as pragmatic. That trend has dramatically changed following Xi Jinping's ascent to China's highest office. Exploring the individual and system-level drivers of Xi's aggressive and provocative approach to international affairs, **ANTHONY TOH** and **JONGHYUK LEE** argue that this approach is counterproductive as it limits the options that China has with which to placate its neighbours.*



Master of the house. But what drives Xi Jinping's foreign policy?

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China's Pragmatic Foreign Policy before Xi's Rise to Power

Ever since China implemented its reform and open-door policy in the late 1970s, its leaders had venerated Deng Xiaoping's *taoguang yanghui* approach to foreign policy, which meant "keeping a low profile until the opportune moment". The Communist Party of China (CPC) was keen to avoid unnecessary confrontation with liberal democracies, which could have been sparked if China had launched any global initiatives. Moreover, the end of the Cold War provided the CPC with [valuable lessons](#) to learn and reflect on: the party directly witnessed how a chauvinistic and overbearing foreign policy had played a critical role in the downfall of the Soviet Union. Hence, China's leaders were wary about being seen as hawkish actors on the international scene.

In order for the Chinese economy to be fully integrated with its advanced counterparts, China was required to prove itself as a peace-loving and trusted member of the international community. Deng Xiaoping's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, embraced his [pragmatic approach](#) in formulating their foreign policies. Liberating the CPC from ideological battles, this pragmatic approach allowed China the flexibility to pursue its [national interests](#). In particular, the [World Trade Organization entry](#) in 2001 was considered a triumph of China's pragmatism. This restrained and sober approach also underpinned Hu Jintao's efforts in 2004 to anchor the international role of China in the concept of "[harmonious rise](#)".

Xi's Emergence and the Shift towards Assertive Foreign Policy

With the rise of Xi Jinping to the highest echelon of the CPC, however, [marked shifts](#) in China's foreign policy would become evident. The pragmatic outlook which characterised Xi's predecessors was largely transformed into an approach notable for [assertiveness and aggression](#). This shift raises an important question: why would Xi prefer a more confrontational attitude?

The first explanation lies in Xi's perception of China's strength in the international arena. It is well documented that Xi sees a [relative decline](#) in the spheres of Western influence. Regardless of whether this view is rooted in reality, or is just a by-product of Chinese hubris, it has emboldened him to make demands of China's neighbours. One thing for sure is that China's [economic and military capabilities](#) have significantly improved over the past decades. In command of the second-largest economy and highly modernised armed forces, the CPC leadership may have assessed that the opportune moment — until which Deng had called on the party to "bide [its] time" — has finally arrived. Such a mindset drives the country's leaders to pursue a more assertive foreign policy stance to better secure China's national interests.

Other scholars and experts point to Xi's diversionary tactics to shore up his domestic legitimacy as driving his assertive foreign policy. His attempt to [secure a third term](#) in office as general secretary of the CPC makes people within and outside of China question his righteousness and erodes his legitimacy, especially after he undermined the previous system of collective leadership and instead personalised political power. Adopting an assertive approach to international affairs may help arrest the slide in his legitimacy by boosting his image as a strong national leader and deflecting attention away from his power grab. A decisive and purposeful foreign policy serves to portray Xi as a national hero who can stand up to foreign actors that bully and take advantage

of China. Such a portrayal would put Xi in a favorable light in the eyes of the increasingly nationalistic Chinese public. The 20th congress of the CPC, scheduled for late 2022, will be a historic moment for Xi to decide whether he might elevate himself to be on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. But Xi would need to deal with the domestic adversities currently afflicting China, such as the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), [economic recession](#), [trade wars](#), and [social unrest](#), before he can proclaim himself the [eternal leader](#) of the party. Xi's adoption of an assertive and provocative stance on the international stage could help to [distract public attention](#) from China's domestic woes and prevent further erosion of his legitimacy.

The third explanation for Xi's foreign policy stance is associated with the political need for him to distinguish himself from Hu Jintao. Hu's political philosophy of "[harmonious society](#)" and "[peaceful rising](#)" materialised into restrained and moderate foreign policy. However, this subdued approach [fuelled a backlash](#) from the Chinese elite. One vivid example involved Taiwan's explicit quest for independence during the presidency of Chen Shui-bian. In 2004, Taiwan held a [referendum for independence](#). Three years later, the Chen administration even [attempted to restore Taiwan's United Nations membership](#). This turn of events drove the Chinese elite to reach a consensus on the need to transform the CPC leadership into a strong and decisive actor so as to deter Taiwan's independence adventure and protect China's national interests. It was in these circumstances that Xi's rise and consolidation of power became possible. Hence, in order to maintain his domestic support base, Xi would have to continue pursuing a hawkish approach to foreign affairs.

Lastly, it is well known that Xi's transformation of China's foreign policy stance results from bureaucratic bargaining. Analysts point out that the [People's Liberation Army \(PLA\)](#) is at the centre of such bargaining. The adoption of a muscular foreign policy can potentially be translated into a bigger slice of the budgetary pie for the PLA. The two high-ranking military generals in the politburo of the CPC, [Xu Qiliang](#) and [Zhang Youxia](#), are known for being Xi's close confidantes as well as for their leftist and nationalistic views. It is possible that they have influenced Xi's strategic calculations. Another set of actors who have benefited from China's assertive foreign policy approach is that of local government officials and managers of various state-owned enterprises (SOEs). According to China watchers, bureaucratic agencies from local governments and SOEs aim to expand their [economic activities](#) in the disputed areas in the South China Sea in order to maximise their earnings. Although it is not certain that aggressive behaviour will be beneficial for China's long-term economic interests, the backing of many bureaucratic actors certainly encourages Xi to adopt a more assertive foreign policy stance.

Consequences of China's Assertive Foreign Policy Approach

In general, an assertive foreign policy is defined as one that seeks to secure national interests in a [proactive and confrontational manner](#). Instead of responding reactively to external threats and stimuli, China under Xi has started to pursue its interests by actively initiating, influencing, and controlling its own regional affairs. For instance, in 2013, China unilaterally declared an Air Defense Identification Zone that has allowed the PLA to [regularly monitor the airspace](#) around the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands. Also, it was not until Xi had assumed the leadership that China began to press its claims to the South China Sea by [building artificial islands and military bases](#)

throughout the Spratly and Paracel island regions. Another salient kind of example of this policy is China's incursions into Taiwan's airspace, such as the [dispatch of 39 warplanes](#) in January 2022.

The adoption of an assertive approach is somewhat counterproductive as it limits China's options in pursuing its foreign relations. Most obviously, it renders China's military expansion inevitable and this will stimulate an arms race in the region. No assertive foreign policy can claim effectiveness if it is not supported by military muscle. Hence, it is no surprise that China's assertive foreign policy would naturally be accompanied by a drive towards the expansion of the PLA. Indeed, in an opening speech to the CPC's 19th party congress in 2017, Xi made it clear that China was on a path towards building a "[world-class military](#)" by the end of 2035. Accordingly, under Xi's watch, the PLA has been significantly upgraded into a "[battle-ready](#)" force that can project power both regionally and globally.

China's effort at military expansion has not gone unnoticed and bears profound consequences. As the Chinese vice-minister of foreign affairs [Le Yucheng](#) himself pointed out, the pursuit of absolute security leads to absolute insecurity — indeed that is no less true in the case of China and its neighbours. China's pursuit of large-scale military modernisation is producing unceasing security competition among countries in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, the fear that China might launch an amphibious attack to annex what it considers a renegade province has prompted Taiwan to modernise its own military force. The same consideration has prompted the United States to press for the Taiwanese purchase of [US-made weapons](#) for asymmetric warfare. Regardless of whether Taiwan's efforts to boost its defence capabilities turn out to be effective in deterring a Chinese invasion, this much is undeniable: Taiwan's efforts to upgrade its defence capabilities will make reunification costlier for China.

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