The foreign policy of Xi Jinping after the 19th Congress: China strives for a central role on the world stage

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Theme
At the recent 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping expounded upon the central features of Chinese foreign policy to be followed over the next five years.

Summary
Over the coming five years Xi Jinping will undertake a more assertive foreign policy aimed at increasing Chinese influence on global governance and within its region. China’s growing surge positions it as a global power that can serve as a model for other countries and as a leader in the effort to guarantee global public goods. The ‘low profile’ foreign policy, designed a quarter of a century ago by Deng Xiaoping, is being left behind for a new road map designed to turn China into a moderately wealthy society by 2020, a developed country by 2035 and a first-rate national power with a world class military by 2050.

Analysis
In the wake of the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), a number of signs indicate that over the next five years Xi Jinping will pursue a foreign policy that intensifies the lines of action defined during his first term (2012-17) and takes advantage of the opportunities opened up by the government of Donald Trump.

Xi’s report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC was particularly clarifying. Based on this document, we can expect Xi to follow a more assertive foreign policy during his second term, conceived to expand China’s influence in the context of global governance, and within its region. No Chinese leader –at least not since China began to suffer the pressures of the colonial powers in the mid-19th century— has demonstrated Xi’s confidence in the role that Beijing could fulfil within the international community. Indeed, Xi made explicit during the inauguration of the 19th Congress of the CPC that China could be a model for other countries, including in political terms.

This confidence stems from the spectacular growth of the capacities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in a range of fields which have augmented its economic, military and soft power. As a result, what happens today in China has an enormous impact on other countries. It is enough to recall that China is the largest national emitter of greenhouse gases and that the fluctuations of its stock market affect all others.
In other words, widespread internal transformation has unleashed China on an ascendant path within the international community, facilitated by the relative decline of traditional powers. Such transformations have made the low-profile foreign policy of Deng Xiaoping obsolete after a quarter of a century as the PRC’s guiding external strategy.

The foreign policy of Xi during his first term

Although Xi’s foreign policy during his first term as leader of the CPC did not represent a total break with the central foreign policy principles of the PRC during the reformist period, it did distance itself substantially from the low-profile strategy established by Deng Xiaoping by defining a more active role for China within the international community. As in other policy areas, Xi Jinping has demonstrated more leadership capacity in foreign policy than his two immediate predecessors (Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), as he has catalysed a diplomatic shift of unprecedented dimensions, at least since the times of Deng.

The implications of Xi’s thinking on Chinese foreign policy are better understood if one analyses the Report of the 18th National Congress of the CPC, along with his book The Governance and Administration of China. In these texts, references to continuity combine with those to innovation. Among the former are: (1) the need for a peaceful international context and an open international economic order for China to continue deepening its economic reforms and development; (2) the firm defence of the sovereignty and territorially integrity of China; (3) support for a more just and inclusive international order within the existing structures of current international institutions; (4) a preference for diplomatic solutions over military approaches to international disputes; (5) the promotion of interstate relations based on respect and mutual benefit; and (6) the opposition to hegemony, expansionism and ‘belligerent’ international relations; and (7) a hands-off approach to the internal affairs of other states.

The innovative elements of Xi’s foreign policy can be summarised by two concepts devised during his first term: ‘great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics’ (zhonguo tese daguo waijiao) and a ‘new model for great power relations’ (xinxing daguo guangxi). Great-power diplomacy implies a recognition of China by the international community not as a typically developing country but rather as a great power ready to assume the corresponding responsibilities. Such potential Chinese contributions are typically framed within the context of the UN, which plays a central role in the overcoming of the international community’s essential challenges, including terrorism, climate change and cybersecurity.

In any event, the report emphasises that China will never seek hegemony, or any kind of benefit at the expense of another state. Along this line, Beijing proposes a new form of relations between the great powers, one based on respect, equality and mutual benefit, instead of on hegemonism and confrontation, and on association as opposed to alliances. This type of relations between great powers implies that each recognise the fundamental national interests of the others. In China’s case this is made concrete by its objective to achieve socioeconomic development peacefully, much like the traditional powers when they firmly defend their sovereignty, territorial integrity and security. As
such, the slogan which typically expressed the low-profile foreign policy of Deng Xiaoping, *tao guang yang hui*, has been replaced by *fen fa you wei* (to strive for success).

These principles have made foreign policy more proactive and assertive than that of Xi’s predecessors, giving rise to different developments with an ambivalent impact on some countries, and new opportunities (or greater risk of conflict) for others. On the one hand, Xi’s foreign policy embraces the vision of neoliberal institutionalism that has remained a constant in Chinese foreign policy since the Cold War. His vision emphasises that we live in a globalised and interdependent world where the large potential for establishing relations of mutually-beneficial cooperation make it obsolete to view international relations as a zero-sum game. In this respect, Xi’s foreign policy is inspired by Hu Jintao’s *theory of peaceful rise*, and places even more emphasis on the high level of interdependence most countries have with each other. Because no country can alone overcome its increasingly global challenges, cooperation between states is indispensable, and to build ‘a community of shared destiny for humanity’ (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) becomes essential. In such a process, China presents itself as willing to take on larger responsibilities in the promotion and articulation of such cooperation. On the other hand, references to the ‘national interests of China’ and to its ‘core interests’ have proliferated. This could either encourage or limit Beijing’s cooperation with other countries. This emphasis on the interests of China is translating into a more assertive foreign policy, especially with regard to the territorial disputes with its neighbours in the South and East China Seas.

With respect to this more cooperative policy, Chinese leaders are increasingly conscious that it is important for the country to enjoy a positive image abroad. For this reason, diplomatic and propaganda efforts have been redoubled to transmit the message that China is not a threat. The arguments are already well known: the commitment to diplomacy as the best route for resolving conflicts, together with free international trade and tolerance for the models of sociopolitical organisation of other countries. However, some concrete actions taken by Beijing have been somewhat more innovative than this rhetoric suggests.

In the past, China has been criticised time and again for taking advantage of the current international order without assuming the responsibility that it should exercise given its capacities. However, it is clear that under Xi Jinping’s leadership China has intensified its commitment to behave as a responsible actor within the international community and to support global public goods, such as environmental protection and the maintenance of peace.

In mid-2014 China and the US announced a joint accord to cooperate in the fight against climate change. For the first time, China committed itself to cap and then reduce the total volume of its GHG emissions (by 2030 at the latest) and to increase the share of clean energy from less than 10% to at least 20% of total national energy consumption. In this way, China established a precedent for other developing countries which until then had remained reticent or even hostile towards the idea of reducing emissions. China’s change of position was crucial to reaching of an agreement at the Paris Climate Change Summit.
During Xi’s first term as the leader of the CPC, China also began to make a substantial contribution to UN peace-keeping missions. Between 2013 and 2017 the number of Chinese ‘blue berets’ deployed on UN missions rose from 1,900 to 2,800, making China the largest troop contributor of the five permanent members of the Security Council. In addition, China has modified the profile of its ‘blue berets’ and now also may include combat troops. During the same years, China’s budget contribution to these missions rose from 6.5% to 10.2% of the total, making it the second-largest financial contributor.

Furthermore, China is making an intense effort to present itself as a country that offers development opportunities to other countries, especially in its own region. On the one hand, Chinese public diplomacy disseminates much information on the role of Chinese international trade and investment; it is not for nothing that China is now the leading export market for 32 countries. On the other hand, Beijing is also leading concrete initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the new silk road, officially known as the One Belt and One Road Initiative. With these projects Xi is attempting, among other things, to demonstrate that China is actively contributing to the economic development of other countries and dealing head-on with one of Asia’s greatest challenges: the lack of infrastructure. The financial requirements of needed infrastructure are of such magnitude –some US$750 billion a year, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB)– that even the ADB (which loans some US$14 billion annually) sees the creation of the AIIB as a positive development, and has come to agreements with it to co-finance projects. The expectations for this new development institution are high enough that more than 50 countries joined as founding members –despite US opposition–. Among them are some of Washington’s traditional allies, such as the UK, Australia and South Korea.

On the other hand, the abandonment of Deng’s low-profile foreign policy has also led to concern outside China. Especially alarming has been the greater propensity during Xi’s first term to act unilaterally to modify the status quo in various territorial and maritime disputes that Beijing has opened with some of its neighbours. Backed by the growing capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army, Xi has been increasingly inclined to impose the Chinese position in disputes which are highly controversial within the international community, and without taking into account the positions of others.

The two clearest examples are found in the South China and East China Seas. The number of Chinese aircraft and ship incursions into these disputed areas increased considerably during the first years of Xi’s government. In November 2013, China also established an ‘air defence identification zone’ in the East China Sea and is planning to do the same over the artificial islands it is constructing in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

The air defence identification zone established by China extends in part over the Senkaku Islands –also known as Diaoyu in China and Diaoyutai in Taiwan–, the sovereignty of which is contested by Japan, the PRC and the Republic of China. Particularly destabilising is the fact that this Chinese air defence identification zone partially overlaps with others previously established by Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. China now requires all aircraft passing through this zone to have previously informed the pertinent Chinese authorities, even if their destination is not China. In the South China Sea, a similar scenario exists. In 2013 Beijing published an official map which added an
additional marker to the part of the sea that China claims; at the end of that year China began to build artificial islands on numerous reefs that it controls in the area. Since then, China has reclaimed more than 13 square kilometres from the sea and constructed significant infrastructure—some of military use—, contravening the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea signed by China and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2002.

The foreign policy of China after the 19th Congress of the CPC

The report presented by Xi Jinping during the 19th Congress of the CPC, along with later declarations by high party officials and many articles in the official Chinese press, all make clear that the plan for the next five years is to maintain continuity with the foreign policy of Xi's first term. This foreign policy is focused on materialising what Xi has called ‘the Chinese dream’, which would—as the recent party congress reminds us—turn China into a moderately wealthy society by 2020, a developed country by 2035 and a first-rate national power with a world class military by 2050.

Given the evolution of Chinese foreign policy since the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, and in light of the recent party congress, it is likely that Chinese diplomacy will continue to focus on taking advantage of the opportunities that Trump generates to augment its international influence, particularly in its own region. Such continuity is logical given the positive balance accorded by the regime to the more assertive foreign policy, with its strong cooperative dimension, undertaken by Xi in recent years. This is illustrated by the way in which Beijing has managed to combine a substantial increase in its presence and operational capacity in the South China Sea, through the construction of artificial islands, with a tightening of relations with the majority of the countries of South-East Asia, thanks to the substantial commercial and financial links that it is deepening with the One Belt and One Road Initiative.

Donald Trump’s arrival to power has produced a deterioration in the international image of the US. China is mobilising all of the instruments of foreign policy to occupy the symbolic space which Washington has lost, especially in two domains: as the guarantor of global public goods and as a reliable and responsible partner in East Asia. In his principal foreign-policy addresses to date this year, Xi has repeatedly emphasised, if with few specifics, China’s commitment to the maintenance of global public goods and, in more detail, to free trade and the fight against climate change. This movement forward by China contrasts, at least implicitly, with the weaker commitment of the US in these areas. For example, in his report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Xi Jinping reaffirmed China’s commitment to free trade and the defence of foreign investor interests, highlighted its leadership in international cooperation on climate change and criticised those countries adopting isolationism.

This suggests China will further develop, during the coming five years, a rhetoric which presents itself as a responsible power committed to the defence of global public goods, and engaged in concrete actions in those areas which coincide with Chinese domestic policy priorities (such as the promotion of exports and environmental protection). This vision is pushed even more explicitly through other instruments of Chinese public diplomacy, such as foreign-language media, in which the ‘the community of shared destiny for humanity’, multilateralism and the promotion of economic and cultural
exchange through the One Belt and One Road Initiative—all of which China now promotes—is sharply contrasted with the ‘America First’ unilateralism and economic and cultural protectionism embodied by Trump.

Furthermore, in this effort to position itself as a normative power, China is not only disseminating values which are already part of the liberal international order; it is also pushing, with increasing confidence, alternative values—such as a more relativist conception of human rights and a ‘Westphalian’ vision of sovereignty—which are much more opposed to the kinds of international interventions which Washington and its allies have engaged in since the end of the Cold War. This growing confidence on the part of Chinese authorities to put forward its values reached a new peak at the recent National Congress of the CPC when Xi explicitly presented China as a possible model, even in political terms, for other countries that wish to deepen their socioeconomic development and maintain their independence: ‘We are fully confident in our ability to maximise the strengths of the defining features of Chinese socialist democracy and to contribute to the political advancement of humanity’.

China’s efforts to increase its international profile are especially notable in East Asia. Beijing can be expected to continue along this path, considering that the neighbourhood is the priority space of action for Xi Jinping’s foreign policy. It is there that most of China’s major geopolitical challenges are concentrated, and where Xi’s ambitious foreign policy—the One Belt and One Road Initiative—is in its initial phase of implementation. China is increasing its influence in the region through a multifaceted strategy which highlights the deepening of commercial and financial ties with its neighbours. While Donald Trump pulls the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and sharpens his protectionist rhetoric, Xi Jinping is leading multilateral initiatives that facilitate free trade and promote connectivity in the region, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the One Belt and One Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In addition, China has significantly increased its foreign direct investment in many of its neighbouring countries and offers them substantial amounts of finance through bilateral channels. In South-East Asia not only does this now translate into substantial influence in bordering countries (which are relatively small and less developed, like Laos and Cambodia), but also since the end of 2016 such influence has extended to countries traditionally close to the US, such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand, and even more recently, Singapore (which at the end of June reached an agreement with China to deepen their cooperation on the One Belt and One Road Initiative, along with its level of economic integration, both through a bilateral free trade agreement and within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership).

With respect to Taiwan, Xi is disposed to negotiate with President Tsai Ing-wen, but only if she recognises the so-called Consensus of 1992 which, from the perspective of Beijing, implies the recognition of a single China, of which Taiwan forms only a part. Given that the Taiwanese President is not willing to accept this principle—which a majority (56%) of the country supports, but which an immense majority (80%) of her voters reject—it is likely that Beijing will maintain moderate pressure on the island. In this process, Beijing will continue to use elements of economic pressure, such as adjusting the number of continental tourists visiting Taiwan, and reducing the diplomatic space available Taipei, which most likely will continue to see the number of countries maintaining diplomatic relations with it decline, along with its capacity to participate in international forums.
Conclusion

Together with the increasing questioning of globalisation by a number of traditional powers (but especially by the US under Trump), China’s growing capacities and willingness, under Xi Jinping, to assume a greater leadership role within the international community are making Beijing’s influence more forcefully felt all across the planet. This trajectory will continue during Xi’s second term at the helm of the CPC, unless China suffers a profound domestic crisis which, at the moment, does not appear likely. In contrast to the solid consensus which exists with respect to this quantitative analysis, the impact of China’s growing international influence is less clear when viewed through a qualitative lens. This is because the foreign policy of Xi Jinping combines a greater willingness to contribute to the defence and maintenance of global public goods with a greater disposition to collaborate with actors in other countries to defend its own national interests more assertively.

These contradictions in Chinese foreign policy are the fruit of the dissonances between the two principal sources of legitimacy of the Beijing regime. At the end of the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping substituted revolutionary ideology—which had lost credibility even within the party leadership—with economic development as the central justification for the monopoly of the CPC on political power. After the repression of the Tiananmen movement, however, and in the midst of the crisis of international communism, this development emphasis was complemented with an intense nationalist indoctrination campaign.

From the early 1990s, Chinese leaders have cultivated both sources of legitimacy to underpin their popularity, much stronger now than it was then. This feeds two logics of action in foreign policy that can be contradictory. On the one hand, the economic development of China continues to be dependent on a peaceful international order and good relations with other states, especially the countries with which it maintains close commercial and financial ties. On the other hand, the spreading of nationalism, together with growing Chinese capacities, only increases the number of voices demanding a firm Chinese position on the international crises that occasionally rock China’s relationships with the world, especially with the US and those countries with which it maintains territorial disputes.

If we consider the way in which Xi Jinping is trying to take advantage of the opportunities that Donald Trump might present to China, then we can expect that in the coming five years the cooperative China will continue, in general, to impose itself upon the belligerent China. This could change if Xi Jinping opts for a confrontational nationalism to bolster his popularity—whether in response to a severe deterioration in the socioeconomic conditions in China or as a reaction to the attempts of other actors to change the status quo in sensitive scenarios like the Straits of Taiwan, the South and East China Seas, and the Korean peninsula. Therefore, the most likely trajectory until 2022 will be one of an assertive foreign policy grounded in cooperation, but also one increasingly less timid with respect to entering a conflict to defend its interests.