



Conference Sketch

China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes It and How Is It Made?

Date: May 19-20, 2011

Place: Asan Institute for Policy Studies

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This Seoul conference was distinctive for its sustained conversation on topics of urgency in the study of Chinese foreign policy. After the subject drew increased scrutiny in 2010 the academic and policy communities have been searching for answers to questions about Chinese policy making. Bringing together leading voices in this inquiry, the conference elicited lively exchanges centered not on refuting rival interpretations but on jointly exploring leads that may clarify the processes of China's foreign policy formulation that have yet to be adequately explained.

Four panels on Day 1 addressed "who makes policy." Two covered the government, party, and the PLA, and the other two considered the emergence of the "Fifth Generation" of leaders and diverse organizations ranging from NGOs and universities to think tanks and the mass media. On Day 2 particular areas of policy were examined, beginning with monetary and fiscal policy and then proceeding to multilateral diplomacy and the international regime. The final two sessions centered on China's Korean policy. This sequence allowed the discussions to proceed from the general to the more specific level.

Almost all of the panels had a Chinese speaker and/or discussant. The Chinese participants actively engaged in asking questions from the audience and responding as panelists to searching inquiries. Korean participants played a lively role in each of the panels. The

atmosphere prioritized the joint search for answers to questions, not differences based on the nationality of the respondent, although there were occasions when some of the Chinese participants were presumed to have knowledge of aspects of recent developments that others at the conference sought to understand better. While one Chinese perspective highlighted scientific decision-making and smooth teamwork at the top, even it warned of a lack of a powerful supervisory mechanism or accountability for serious mistakes.

One question that laid the groundwork for others was why after thirty years of relatively successful foreign policy had China angered so many countries in the span of eighteen months from the second half of 2009. In the search for causality various points of view were presented. At one extreme were arguments that the changing direction at the top set the overall course for growing belligerence. Some postulated the presence of a “grand strategy.” At the other extreme were assertions that the leaders lost control over developments in the face of strong interest groups, only belatedly trying to impose order. They pointed to the growing involvement of diverse actors with no suitable arrangements for timely coordination. A proliferation of actors raises the need for tighter management, which is not being met.

One question related to coordination was why China has not established a national security council. The absence of such an organization points to the importance of personal ties rather than institutions and the reluctance of retiring leaders, who retain an interest in shaping policy, to see an organization limit their influence. Some consideration went to the role of the PLA in opposing institutional changes that could undercut its influence. Divided leadership responsibilities cannot easily be reversed. This is growing more serious as authority has become more fractured and the view that China should more actively defend its interests has become prevalent. Those who want to see China respected on the international stage have been losing ground to powerful interest groups and need a new mechanism.

A linkage was drawn between the weakness of leadership and the need to show toughness on the sort of sensitive issues that arose in 2010. Participants questioned to what degree the influence of the top leader has declined as well as how much further this is likely to proceed when Xi Jinping succeeds Hu Jintao. Is this transformation so far-reaching that the top-down model is fading in China? Others did not accept the premise even if a single leader is no longer as powerful, citing evidence of leadership debates and decisions that at critical

moments set the course for new directions in foreign policy. One concern is the compartmentalization, favoring certain research institutes over others. The absence of horizontal communications and shared information favors certain influential organizations, driving policy on critical issues in a more hard-line direction, as seen in the decisions made through 2010.

Examining recent turning points in Chinese foreign policy, from its growing challenges to the United States and its allies in the second half of 2009 to its shift toward increased accommodation at the end of 2010, elicited many ideas about how and why decisions were taken. While some Chinese speakers suggested that China was largely reacting to problems caused mainly by the United States, a majority of commentators pointed to growing confidence in China's international standing as decisive, whether or not it was accompanied by deepening insecurity about domestic problems. This was repeatedly cited in Chinese writings explaining why more aggressive responses are needed to "provocations."

One theme was the extent to which the changing narrative found in Chinese publications provides a clear picture of the subsequent direction of foreign policy and serves as a precursor to policy changes. This requires assessments of how solid the mainstream narrative is as opposed to clashing opinions, especially during the high tide of foreign policy activism in 2010. When alternative viewpoints gained ground in 2011 they raised doubts about the extent of China's power and the timing of its ability to challenge the United States, but presenters were not convinced that they seriously challenged the premises of the narrative established in 2010. An alternative narrative called for patience without redressing the demonization of rivals led by the United States and the arrogant claims to pride.

Sino-U.S. relations inevitably became the subject of many exchanges of views. Neither American nor Chinese participants were of one accord. While there was unavoidable attention to the sequence of mutual responses, the conference often turned to the question of the organizations inside China reacting to the United States and their reasoning in steering bilateral relations in 2009-11. One focus was comparisons of Chinese think tanks and their varied access to the inner circle of leadership. If in the past think tanks played a critical role in China's embrace of multilateralism and its enthusiasm over soft power, the hierarchy of

access and power of informal channels proved to favor moves that undermined more than a decade of progress in managing international relations.

In one panel on Day 2 questions about policy making focused on China's success in short-term crisis management in 2008-10 at the expense of making tough decisions that would prevent the further build-up of an economic bubble. While leaders concluded from China's immediate success that their system is superior to capitalism, they also faced warnings that in the name of harmony they were not addressing serious problems. As inflation has risen, the political debate on rebalancing economic development has intensified, but so far there is no indication how policy making will succeed.

Another panel explored the meaning of multilateralism in China, concluding that sovereignty is so privileged that little room is left for genuine multilateralism. The recent case of North Korea casts a dark shadow of how China has reacted even as this damaged prospects for a rump group of five to cooperate within the six-party framework. The bulk of the discussion was about maritime issues and their significance for China's cooperation with ASEAN. Attention turned to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO) as well. A persistent theme was how China strives to weaken the United States, for example, limiting its ships in China's EEZ and its bases in Central Asia. International regimes such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea are interpreted in this light.

Discussions brought out various facets of the reasoning behind policy changes. Sorting through the pros and cons of various explanations stimulated many informed exchanges. Diverse opinions focused on specific organizations and their changing influence. Given the importance of the North Korean issue in China's foreign policy and the fact that the conference took place in Seoul it was no surprise that the discussion kept returning to the determinants of China's policy toward the Korean peninsula. Given what foreigners had learned over the past decade, China's shift on North Korea aroused special interest in better understanding who shapes foreign policy based on what reasoning. As opposed to the Foreign Ministry, the International Liaison Department and the PLA drew the closest scrutiny.

The most attention to Chinese Internet voices and their opinions centered on views of the two Koreas. There was interest in what accounts for friendlier attitudes toward North Korea than

South Korea as well as the determinants of widespread critical views of the South, to the degree of mocking it. This was discussed separately from the coverage of China's 2009 debate over North Korea's bellicose turn and how China should respond to calls in the United States and South Korea for more cooperation. The fact that Chinese sources have been demonizing South Korea without blaming North Korea for its violent conduct and threatening rhetoric prompted intense consideration of China's motives.

Policy making toward North Korea was the subject of close scrutiny. This involved analyzing the divergent views of various types of Chinese strategists and considering how different interest groups, notably the PLA, responded to the evolving situation in 2009-10. The significance of Hu Jintao's agreement in January 2011 to joint language with Barack Obama also was of persistent interest. As the conference proceeded, news spread of Kim Jong-il's third trip to China in the span of one year, a further impetus to try to understand how China's North Korean policy is evolving. There was little optimism that the presumed Chinese response through bilateral meetings with the United States and the Six-Party Talks as conducted in 2003-08 would be resumed. Although Taiwan was not a central focus of the conference, some linkages were drawn between China's shift on Korea and its strategy toward Taiwan, raising the possibility that both hot spots could produce confrontations.

Overall, the success of the May Asan conference can be attributed to at least five factors. First, the topic was unusually timely, having already become the subject of up-to-date research by various scholars. Second, in their papers and panel discussions the participants followed the instructions closely, making possible a cohesive, sustained conversation and also a productive division of labor. Third, the participants proved to be attentive listeners, sticking carefully to the schedule without belaboring their own viewpoints and responding precisely to the key or controversial arguments raised by others. Fourth, a promising mix was found of persons with policy making experience who have returned to the academia or think tanks and academics deeply attuned to the policy making process. Finally, the conference was conducted on a high professional level, navigating the often difficult road of a joint, objective search for knowledge and insight rather than straying onto tempting tangential paths of making sure that one's own interpretations gain an edge over others. It may have helped that Seoul is on the frontline of the competition between Beijing and Washington and in the crosshairs of Pyongyang, adding gravity to awareness of the serious stakes involved.

As useful as the conference was, there is no hiding the unsatisfied quest for more definitive information about the views of China's leaders and how they have evolved. The challenge continues to gather more information and deepen our insight into the inner workings of China's decision-making process. This is especially important at a time of leadership transition. Much of the discussion sought to anticipate factors that will shape that transition, and there should be no let-up in this pursuit.