The sources of China’s assertiveness: the system, domestic politics or leadership preferences?

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Since the late 1990s, China’s growing engagement with neighbouring countries and international institutions has facilitated its ‘peaceful rise’ to Great Power status. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, however, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has begun to place greater importance on defending its core national interests and asserting its maritime sovereignty claims. Many scholars describe China’s new approach to foreign policy as ‘assertive’. China has begun to interfere with US surveillance activities, and in the territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas Beijing has displayed muscular behaviour not seen in many years, causing alarm among many of its neighbours. On the other hand, China has been increasingly proactive on such matters as anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, financial and monetary reform, and international cooperation regarding the Libyan civil war. Beijing has become more ambitious in articulating its foreign policy goals with the aim of being treated as Washington’s equal, while its

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4 Christensen, ‘The advantages of an assertive China’.


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diplomatic establishment seems to view the country as a leading global power with broadened interests and responsibilities, and is abandoning the conservative and low-profile approach to foreign affairs that characterized the initial stage of the reform era.6

Given the significance of China’s rise over the past few decades, it is imperative to explain why Beijing has started pursuing a more assertive foreign policy. There are a number of possibilities when considering this question. Some observers focus on the characteristics of the Chinese leaders.7 Others place emphasis on the coordination problems within the decision-making process caused by the existence of multiple domestic agents.8 Yet others explain Beijing’s external behaviour with reference to the growth in China’s economic and military capabilities.9 Each of these factors operates at a somewhat different level of analysis—from the individual, to domestic politics, to the overall system.10 All three types of factors—actors, domestic circumstances and systemic conditions—contribute to almost all the explanations. But in certain circumstances, one or other of these factors seems more salient.11 One particular set of factors can lead us to conclusions about the causes of the change in China’s assertiveness that are different from conclusions generated by the others—and hence to different predictions of Beijing’s future behaviour.

This article examines each of the above-mentioned levels of explanation and concludes that China’s more assertive foreign policy since 2009 can mainly be attributed to elite perceptions and leadership preferences. The findings suggest that individual factors can play a major role in explaining China’s external behaviour, especially when the perceptions of the political elites are deeply embedded in the leader’s preferences.

As China’s new leader Xi Jinping begins to exert his transformative influence on the country’s role in global politics, it is important to examine the reasons behind its more assertive foreign policy in order to identify potential regional and

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10 The study of levels of analysis in international relations is a discipline in which scholars typically talk about the system, the state and the individual as the main units of analysis. For seminal works, see Kenneth N. Waltz, Man, the state, and war: a theoretical analysis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); David J. Singer, ‘The level-of-analysis problem in International Relations’, World Politics 14: 1, Oct. 1961, pp. 77–92.
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global implications. This analysis can enhance our understanding of why traditional explanations of Chinese foreign policy behaviour may miss their predictive mark if they do not include the role of the state leader. Therefore, studying the reasons behind China’s assertive external behaviour not only helps to improve existing theoretical models in international relations and foreign policy analysis, but also informs our understanding of the broader policy implications of China’s rise.

Explaining China’s new assertiveness

In order to understand the external behaviour of the PRC, previous research has taken into account both international and domestic factors. The challenge for foreign policy analysis is to investigate further the conditions in which either domestic or international factors predominate. In seeking to explain China’s assertiveness, we should begin by considering the potential weight of broad, general causes, such as system-level factors, and then focus on those unit-level and individual-level elements that are distinctive to China but can potentially be applied to other countries.

System-level explanations

System-level explanations of China’s new assertiveness start from the premise that international pressures are essentially determinate. These pressures, such as distributions of power, networks of alliances or patterns of global trade, can be defined in terms of systemic characteristics because they exert a powerful, generalizable influence on any country’s foreign policy. Thus, the more we can support the analysis of systemic variables of this kind, the more we can develop a theory that may have cross-national applications.

In a sense, Chinese assertiveness is a response to changes in the international distribution of power, particularly those consequent on the events of the 2008 global financial crisis. Thanks, in part, to China’s role as the ‘global economic powerhouse’ and the slowdown that afflicted most western countries, China emerged as a leading global power with new interests and responsibilities. It was only natural for Beijing to increase its demands that other countries respect its national interests and international status. In these circumstances, at least three plausible system-level explanations for China’s assertiveness can be identified. They are state power, external threat and national interest.

China’s assertiveness as the outcome of a sudden increase in its power Perhaps the most convenient explanation for Beijing’s more hard-line foreign policy is the dramatic shift that took place in the international distribution of power as the United States

floundered in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and China continued to grow. In particular, the rise in China’s economic strength and declining faith in America’s leadership capabilities have produced a new spirit of assertiveness against the United States in the political and security fields. The global financial crisis thus presented an opportunity for rational and calculating Chinese leaders to pursue their goals and preferences. When the PRC becomes more powerful, it tends to adopt a more costly and confrontational foreign policy, whereas it is less assertive when its power begins to wane. As Avery Goldstein has already noted:

If China’s relative capabilities were to increase dramatically, or if Beijing concluded that the system’s most capable actors lacked the interest or resolve to resist Chinese initiatives … China might then shift to a strategy that more assertively attempted to reshape the international system according to its own preferences. Such a relaxation of the external constraints on China’s foreign policy could result from an improbably rapid process of economic and military modernization that quickly elevated the PRC to superpower status or if China’s strongest competitors proved unable or unwilling to remain internationally engaged.

However, such an explanation simply cannot be squared with the facts of the situation since 2008. The PRC’s relative capability has definitely improved since the global financial crisis, but it is not quite first among equals. Beijing is playing a critical military role, but not one that overshadows the military contribution of the United States. As figure 1 shows, Chinese military spending has consistently risen since the turn of the century, yet at a rate still roughly on a par with that of the United States. As Robert Ross notes, ‘China has yet to develop significant new military capabilities that can explain China’s new diplomacy.’ More importantly, there is no reason to expect a direct relationship between China’s economic ascent and the United States’ economic decline. By any objective assessment the United States remains the world’s most powerful economy in almost every category.

China’s assertiveness as a response to a growing threat to the territory of the PRC Even if Chinese power had not significantly increased, perhaps a sabre-rattling strategy was necessary because of the intensified maritime disputes that threatened Beijing’s longstanding commitment to the integrity of its national territory. For example,

14 Mearsheimer, ‘The gathering storm’.
China began to interfere significantly with US surveillance activities in the South China Sea, to oppose US–South Korean joint exercises in the Yellow Sea, and to lodge protests with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines over sovereignty disputes in the East and South China Seas. According to this argument, China’s tougher position in the contested maritime areas was aimed at deterring other countries from challenging the status quo. As Alastair Iain Johnston notes, ‘in response to more proactive diplomacy by other claimants to establish the legal boundaries of their claims in the region’ Beijing began to ‘assert the extent of China’s claims so as to clarify what it can (and will) diplomatically and militarily defend’.21 This pattern of assertiveness seems to be reactive rather than proactive, defensive rather than offensive.

However, it is difficult to support the argument that China’s actions were merely reactive and defensive, as on some occasions it was Beijing rather than any of the other parties that was responsible for escalating the tension, particularly regarding the maritime disputes.22 For example, after the collision between a Chinese fishing vessel and the Japanese coastguard in waters off the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in 2010, Beijing ceased high-level contacts with Tokyo, suspended Chinese exports of rare earth metals to Japan and connived in large anti-Japanese protests. Similarly, in its dispute with the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, Beijing not only conducted military exercises in the area but also restricted the import of agricultural products from the Philippines and stopped Chinese tourist groups from going there.23 While no serious threat was posed to China’s security

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21 Johnston, ‘How new and assertive is China’s new assertiveness?’, p. 19.
23 Samantha Hoffman, ‘Sino-Philippine tension and trade both rising amid Scarborough standoff’, China Brief
interests in the contested areas, Beijing seemed to be deliberately asserting its sovereignty claims through the use of aggressive tactics.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{China’s assertiveness as a response to increasing overseas economic interests which demanded more diplomatic activism}  The third systemic explanation attributes China’s outward assertiveness to its integration into the world economy and the expansion of its economic interests. In response to China’s increasing foreign trade, Beijing began to extend the country’s diplomatic and military reach. In particular, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) embarked on the construction of a blue-water navy to safeguard the country’s sea lines of communication (SLOCs). With the development of capabilities for distant naval operations, including the construction of aircraft carriers, China aims to develop ‘limited power projection’ to protect its regional and overseas interests.\textsuperscript{25} Unfortunately, PLAN’s modernization drive has triggered an arms race in the region, creating a widespread perception since 2009 that China is practising gunboat diplomacy.\textsuperscript{26}

This explanation fails on two grounds. First, there was no surge in export and import activity in China after the 2008 financial crisis. As figure 2 shows, China’s international trade rose to 65 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006, but by 2014 had fallen back to around 40 per cent of GDP. Overall, China’s continuing prosperity was driven by enlarging domestic consumption, not by expanding foreign trade. Second, China’s economic interests are likely to be threatened by efforts to flex its maritime muscle. China’s trade with the United States and Japan, its largest and third-largest trading partners respectively, could only be jeopardized by the kind of maritime machismo that Washington and Tokyo would naturally find alarming. China’s energy imports from the Middle East are also protected by American free trade and freedom of navigation policy. China’s image of international assertiveness will do little to serve its business community’s interest in expanding foreign markets.

In sum, a system-level examination of China’s changing external environment and overseas economic interests fails to provide a plausible explanation of Beijing’s foreign policy shift since 2009. Given that China is likely to overtake the United States and become the world’s largest economy by 2020, it has no need to change current favourable international trends. It seems that China’s traditional foreign policy course, governed by the maxim ‘hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time’ (taoguang yanghui), would continue to ensure a peaceful external environment for the country’s economic development. As Yuen Foong Khong bluntly puts it:

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\textit{12: 9, 26 April 2012, pp. 13–16}.
\textsuperscript{24} Beijing’s deliberate extension of its ‘core interests’ argument further calls into question its true intentions. See Kai He and Huiyun Feng, ‘China’s bargaining strategies for a peaceful rise: successes and challenges’, \textit{Asian Security} 10: 2, 2014, pp. 168–87; Zeng et al., ‘Securing China’s core interests’.
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China’s best shot at dislodging the United States is to continue growing at 6 to 8 percent annually for another quarter century. When China’s leaders say that they must continue to focus on internal economic development, and that in turn requires a peaceful and stable Asia, I read that to mean that they are in no hurry to displace the United States … Another twenty-five years of strong economic growth and China might be in a position to play the role that the United States played after World War II, in Asia and beyond.27

Figure 2: China’s foreign trade as % of GDP, 1999–2014


Unit-level explanations

A second approach to explaining Chinese assertiveness is to emphasize the role of domestic pressure in shaping external behaviour. Although international pressure may constrain state leaders’ policy choices, in the final analysis their decisions are critically shaped by domestic politics, fuelled by competing preferences and interests.28 Domestic factors, such as power succession, state structure and societal interests, can provide clues to the respective likelihood of change or continuity within a given policy. Therefore, domestic politics influences China’s external behaviour by creating internal incentives for diplomatic activism.

The following paragraphs attempt to show how these domestic factors both drive and direct the process of China’s assertive foreign policy. Three types of explanation can be advanced, differing from one another in respect of which domestic factors are privileged in the analysis and how much weight is assigned


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to external behaviour. These types of explanation are bureaucratic competition, elite struggle and the upsurge of nationalism.

**China’s assertiveness as a consequence of bureaucratic competition**  Perhaps the most popular explanation for China’s hard-line policy is that it is the outcome of competition among governmental actors. Given the increasing diversity and plurality of China’s decision-making process, many scholars have suggested that attention should focus on the influence of interest groups on Chinese foreign policy.29 For example, the PLA has a greater capacity to shape foreign policy agendas.30 Bureaucrats, such as local government officials and managers of state-owned enterprises, may emphasize certain national interests that complement their more parochial objectives. Scholarship in this tradition argues that China’s tough behaviour might be driven by the desire of certain ministries or agencies to increase their budgets, to promote sectoral trade or to ensure adequate supplies of energy.31 From this perspective, China’s provocative behaviour could reflect a shift either in the relative power of relevant actors or in the structure of the decision-making process, which in turn is seen as the result of the Chinese government’s dysfunctional internal dynamics.

Nevertheless, the explanatory power of bureaucratic competition is, at best, uncertain for at least three reasons. First, such an explanation is insufficient to account for the dramatic shift in China’s foreign policy within such a short timespan. Policy inertia is a more likely outcome in countries with many competing bureaucracies that participate in decision-making, as interest groups that favour the status quo have opportunities to thwart policy change.32 The more fragmented a state’s decision-making, the higher the likelihood that powerful actors will impede policy change. Second, competition among bureaucrats also means that powerful actors cannot make foreign policy decisions alone. The fragmented decision-making process could actually give party leaders a certain amount of leeway in controlling policy agendas and making decisions.33

Finally, as some scholars have observed, party leaders remain in firm control of foreign affairs.34 We often see a restructuring of the decision-making process when there is a shift in relative power at the top of the bureaucracy. However, neither the PLA nor state-owned enterprises have increased their presence in the Polit-

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buro.35 Even after the establishment of the National Security Committee (NSC) in November 2013, the purpose of which is to enhance party leaders’ ability to limit and synchronize the actions of relevant agencies, manifestations of Chinese assertiveness persisted.36 For example, only a few days after the establishment of the NSC, Beijing announced a new Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) that encompassed the disputed Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.37 This initiative involved a clear, defined division of labour between the State Council, the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

China’s assertiveness as a result of struggle within the country’s elites Another potential explanation of Chinese assertiveness is that it is the result of elite competition during a period of leadership transition. That is to say, when China goes through a power succession crisis, the political elites are more likely to resort to jingoism to bolster their legitimacy, contributing to increased belligerence in China’s external behaviour.38 This is what happened in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, which would produce the next generation of Chinese leaders. The process was further complicated by an intensified conflict between elites—what became known as the ‘Bo Xilai affair’.39 One illustration of this was the assertion by a few officials that the South China Sea should be numbered among China’s ‘core interests’ alongside Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. While this was not national policy, the top leaders refrained from contradicting this assertion to avoid criticism from their political opponents.40 If this interpretation were correct, moderation, as well as foreign policy discipline, would have been restored after the transition.

However, China’s continued assertiveness over time, even after Xi Jinping had been elected to the country’s highest posts early in 2013, has refuted the contention that this behaviour is the by-product of elite competition. Had fear of political survival among Chinese leaders been the motivation for the diplomatic about-turn, we would expect the new foreign policy to have been re-examined or abandoned. Yet this is not the case. Moreover, China’s more proactive posture on global issues as wide-ranging as the reform of international financial institutions, operations to thwart piracy in the Gulf of Aden and international cooperation with respect to the Libyan civil war seems to indicate that its new foreign policy might be designed to appeal to more widespread sentiments.41 Perhaps it is rooted...
not in parochially based political interests, but in a changing social climate that was undermining previous perceptions of China’s international status.

China’s assertiveness as a response to an upsurge of nationalism at home  The third unit-level explanation for China’s hawkish behaviour is that it is a response to the resurgence of popular nationalism during the global financial crisis.\(^{42}\) China’s rebounding economy, along with the success of the 2008 Olympic Games and the military parade staged in 2009 to mark the 60th anniversary of the PRC, encouraged many Chinese to believe that ‘the western financial crisis was the culmination of thirty years of economic growth and of China’s rise to Great Power status’.\(^{43}\) Meanwhile, although the Chinese leadership remains cautious where nationalism is concerned, leaders have become ‘more willing to follow the popular nationalist calls for confrontation against the Western powers and [China’s] neighbours’ in order to defend national interests.\(^{44}\) This suggests that it was nationalist pressure that nudged the Chinese government into a succession of maritime disputes and declaration of the ADIZ. In other words, the Chinese leadership has had to respond to nationalist sentiment to secure its legitimacy, rather than mobilizing mass nationalism to achieve foreign policy expansionism.

This ‘mob’ nationalism explanation fails on three grounds. First, concerns about the surge in popular nationalism might be exaggerated. Even after the 2008 financial crisis, many Chinese were quite realistic in their perceptions of China’s international status.\(^{45}\) According to a Pew Global Attitudes survey, although over 50 per cent of Chinese people believe that the PRC will eventually replace the United States as the world’s leading power, they still think the US, not China, is the world’s top economy (see figure 3).

Second, the rise of popular nationalism has not necessarily caused Beijing to lose control over its foreign policy. Chinese nationalism has reared its head repeatedly over the past few decades, with regular appeals to adopt aggressive policies. This argument fails to explain why the case is different this time.\(^{46}\) Finally, the Chinese leadership actually makes use of nationalism in its risky security strategies.\(^{47}\) Given the state’s manipulation of the mass media and mass education, the Chinese leadership can generate public support for anything to serve its diplomatic purposes. Once nationalist fervour has been whipped up, leaders can claim that their choices were constrained and compromise is difficult.\(^{48}\)


\(^{43}\) Ross, ‘The domestic sources of China’s “assertive diplomacy”’, p. 79.

\(^{44}\) Zhao, ‘Foreign policy implications of Chinese nationalism revisited’, p. 536.

\(^{45}\) As figure 3 shows, the number of Chinese people who believe the United States is the world’s top economy is consistently higher than the number who believe China is the world’s economic leader. The only exception was in the year 2009, when equal proportions of respondents (41%) opted for China and the United States.


\(^{47}\) Zeng et al., ‘Securing China’s core interests’, p. 251.

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In short, there are two reasons why a unit-level examination of China’s bureaucratic competition, leadership transition and domestic nationalism fails to provide a credible explanation for China’s new foreign policy assertiveness. First, if domestic pressure were driving the Chinese regime to resort to an assertive foreign policy, we would see the same level of assertiveness throughout the history of the PRC. This is not the case, however. China adopted a conservative and low-profile approach to foreign affairs under Jiang Zemin and his successor Hu Jintao. Second, the argument’s basic logic is flawed: if China really faced internal insecurity or regime vulnerability, it would choose a more cooperative strategy to maintain a stable external environment. If M. Taylor Fravel is correct, instability in China would lead it to seek better relations with neighbouring countries. Therefore, as will be discussed below, it may be China’s success, or ‘perceived success’, in weathering the global financial crisis of 2008, that is behind its assertive foreign policy.

Individual-level explanations

The third and final approach—the individual-level explanation—assumes that policy change occurs because of changes in political elites’ perceptions. These elite perceptions are a set of interlocking ideas, beliefs and assumptions held either by a group of policy-makers or by individual leaders. International pressure is

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interpreted subjectively through these preconceived beliefs and assumptions. In this respect, while China’s place in the world and its international interests may have remained unchanged, political elites’ understanding of them has changed substantially. The elites want to embrace a foreign policy that is commensurate with China’s new role in the international arena and the prestige it implies. As a result, a small circle of political leaders, policy-makers and intellectuals have collectively become a dynamic force behind China’s self-assertion.

The following explanations explore China’s attitudes since the financial crisis and their impact on foreign policy. They argue that elite perceptions of China’s global role and of Chinese priorities, or individual leaders’ preferences regarding this role and these priorities, shape the highly political choices involved in foreign policy shifts.

**China’s assertiveness as a reflection of changes in dominant elite perceptions**

The cognitive explanation for China’s assertiveness is that it is the manifestation of a ‘triumphalist’ mentality among Chinese elites and intellectuals. As figure 4 shows, the financial crisis has contributed to an upsurge in Chinese academic writing about the ‘US decline’ and the rise of the Chinese model of development. This has led Chinese elites to challenge the orthodoxy and support more ambitious policies.51 State media and policy analysts began to champion the ‘Beijing consensus’ or the ‘China model’ as an alternative to the western liberal order.52 Some policy-makers have proposed a ‘Chinese version of G2 (the Group of Two)’ to manoeuvre the country onto an equal footing with the United States.53 Others are convinced that Washington’s commitment to East Asia has declined and that China will sooner or later replace the United States as the world’s number one military power.54 As a consequence, Chinese leaders may think that there is a window of opportunity they can exploit, or that by engaging in conflicts the country could accumulate more resources.55 While the rise of an elite vision of national rejuvenation has nothing to say directly about whether China needs to acquire aircraft carriers or spacecraft, it implies the necessity of military modernization and an outward-going strategy.

There are several caveats that should be applied to such an explanation. First, explanations for changes in behaviour based on assumptions about perceptions

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55 According to Liu Mingfu, a retired colonel of the PLA, the goal of the China Dream is to ‘grasp the strategic opportunity for strengthening the military’ in order to surpass America to become the world’s number one military power. See Liu, *Zhongguo meng*, p. 265.
can be difficult, if not impossible, to prove wrong. Beijing’s provocative behaviour may indeed represent a manifestation of rampant triumphalism on the part of Chinese elites, but it may also reflect a carefully calibrated plan to achieve the regime’s diplomatic objectives. Undue faith in Beijing’s cognitive bias could lead to the danger of misperception. Moreover, even if triumphalism encourages a rethinking of foreign policy, it does not necessarily imply a change of course. New thinking does not exert an influence on its own. In order to replace traditional thinking and acquire political endorsement within a government, new policy thinking has to serve the agenda of the ruling party.

Finally, the leadership plays a central role in the determination of a state’s foreign policy agenda. Especially in non-democratic countries, leaders who serve as the final arbiters in the selection of options are more able to mobilize societies to support a range of otherwise controversial and costly foreign and domestic policy objectives. As Oriana Skylar Mastro notes, ‘even if some Chinese thinkers disagreed with this interpretation of assertiveness leading to great foreign policy achievements, Chinese leaders may bury this dissent and double down on their preferred methods of promoting foreign policy interests regardless.’ As a result, foreign policy change is more likely in non-democratic countries, since authoritarian leaders have the ability to switch quickly to a policy they believe is promising.

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China’s assertiveness as a reflection of changes in the preferences of the dominant leader

Whereas the cognitive explanation focuses on how political elites collectively shape foreign policy choices, the state leader explanation concentrates on the importance of the single actor in charge and the difference he or she makes to decisions. Taking the individual as a decision-making unit, if a leader has almost autocratic power, institutional constraint and bureaucratic consensus are fairly irrelevant. In such contexts, where leaders have the final say, what they believe about their foreign counterparts has a great impact on subsequent outcomes.59

Given that authoritarian regimes have a preference for stability, it has been suggested that innovation in foreign policy is most likely to occur when there is a change of leadership. China’s assertive foreign policy is thus a result of the new leader’s assessments of the external environments and personal preferred options.

Although a thread of continuity has run through Chinese diplomacy, Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012 has seen a resurgence of well-known traditional Chinese views on international affairs.60 Since taking power, the new Chinese leader has talked of ‘striving for achievements’ (fenfa youwei), signalling a new theme in Chinese diplomacy.61 Nevertheless, he is perhaps best known for his ‘China Dream’—a diplomatic initiative designed to bring about a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.62 Xi’s new rhetoric may represent more than a temporary shift, suggesting that the guideline of keeping a low international profile (expressed in Deng Xiaoping’s mantra ‘hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time’ [taoguang yanghui]), which has shaped Chinese foreign policy since the early 1990s, is finally giving way to a more activist inclination.63

Indeed, according to many observers of China, the new leader ‘has his own opinion on foreign affairs. He may act on his own convictions, instead of simply following those of his staff and advisers. He tends to be more assertive on foreign affairs.’64 David Lampton notes that ‘some “supreme” leaders, at the start of their terms, use external conflicts to shore up their positions with both the military and the populace, exerting more control over the PLA and external relations once they have consolidated power.’65 Indeed, as Oriana Skylar Mastro observes, ‘Xi Jinping

60 Xi has advocated a ‘Great Power diplomacy’ (daguo waijiao) with Chinese characteristics, including the promotion of traditional culture and values. See ‘The central conference on work relating to foreign affairs was held in Beijing’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 29 Nov. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215680.shtml.
61 In his first work forum on peripheral diplomacy in October 2013, Xi emphasized that the country should ‘strive for achievements’. See ‘Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuowei guozuo zuotanhui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua’ [Xi Jinping delivers important speech at the periphery diplomacy work forum], Xinhua, 25 Oct. 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_17878897.htm.

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himself has articulated more hard-line policies concerning territorial disputes, and Chinese assertiveness has noticeably increased under his watch.'66 It seems fairly clear that the new Chinese leadership has recognized the need to go beyond ‘biding its time’ in foreign policy and has opened the way for a shift towards a more proactive global stance.

However, such a leader-centric explanation should not be accepted without question. First, although Xi entered the top group of China’s decision-makers as early as 2007, there is scant evidence for attributing China’s assertiveness to this rising leader’s efforts.67 Policy-making in China, often characterized as a black box, is not sufficiently transparent to allow thoroughgoing research into the influence on the process of a certain individual. Moreover, it would be presumptuous to suggest that a change in the behaviour of a state is always down to the preferences of a particular leader at a specific time. The incentives for and constraints on any particular leader are formed by the environment, be it domestic or international. At the very least, therefore, both the individual and the systemic explanations should be considered as alternative independent variables in any multilevel analysis.

In sum, individual-level explanations indicate that China’s assertiveness is a function of both enduring elements in the Chinese political leadership and new policy-relevant perceptions. That these two ingredients are closely linked should not be surprising, since new perceptions win adherents only if they can be made to fit within a dominant leader’s preferences in a given historical setting. Faced with different external and internal environments, a leader will tend to invest in a foreign policy that will boost his or her international reputation as an effective statesperson, as well as consolidate the domestic coalitions that enable that leader to hold on to political power. Recognizing this fact, the Xi Jinping administration has begun to frame Chinese leadership in the region as an embodiment of enduring Chinese values and culture.

Conclusion

This article has examined the system-level, unit-level and individual-level explanations for China’s more assertive foreign policy. It seems that systemic pressures would, if anything, militate against a change in Beijing’s traditional approach to foreign affairs. Although recent international trends favour the PRC, and Washington had gone out of its way to accommodate Beijing through the Obama administration’s policy of reassurance,68 China still fundamentally lacks the

67 Xi Jinping was elected to the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 and subsequently became China’s Vice-President and then Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Committee. For a related discussion, see Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, ‘The People’s Republic of China leadership transition and its external relations: still searching for definitive answers’, Journal of Chinese Political Science 20: 1, 2015, pp. 1–16.
68 Jeffrey A. Bader, Obama and China’s rise: an insider’s account of America’s Asia strategy (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012). According to Scobell and Harold, the initial wave of Chinese assertiveness in 2008–9 was prompted by a perception in Beijing that the Obama administration was accommodating China’s ‘core interests’ through a policy of reassurance. As a consequence, the US administration changed its strategy towards China and strengthened its military and diplomatic posture in the Asia–Pacific through a policy of ‘returning to Asia’. This caused China to perceive the United States as a threat and behave even more asser-
capacity to truly balance the United States. Meanwhile, the internal and societal stresses faced by the Chinese leadership have also made assertiveness a less, not a more, attractive policy. More importantly, China’s increased assertiveness did not coincide with changes in international and domestic circumstances. Indeed, to a significant degree, the Chinese leadership is flying in the face of internal and external political and economic shifts: the slowdown in China’s economic growth, the intensification of the regional arms race, and the United States’ increasing preoccupation with Asia are all adding to the security challenges Beijing has to face, thus calling into question the continuing utility of this new foreign policy course.

Perhaps China’s new assertiveness can be better explained, then, in terms of the perceptions of its political elites and the preferences of its leaders. As Thomas Christensen has argued, certain perceptions and beliefs may cause Chinese leaders to initiate confrontational strategies. While major events in the international system may require the modification of foreign policy, it is the policy-makers who respond to this need. To shore up legitimacy at home, a skilful leader can act as an agent of change even in the absence of any overwhelming systemic or domestic forces. He or she can exploit the window of opportunity to ratchet up military buildup, extend the nation’s interests and expand the country’s geopolitical reach. While system- and unit-level approaches represent influential theoretical frameworks, paying attention to the role of state leaders’ preferences might help us better comprehend some puzzling cases.

Individual-level analysis not only offers a better explanation of the sources of China’s assertiveness, but also provides a different perspective on the study of China’s rise. Conventional wisdom often sees the trajectory of China’s ascent through the lens of either system-level or state-level analysis, ignoring the impact of the state leaders’ preferences on China’s growing assertiveness in international politics. In particular, whether a stronger China will pursue a more cooperative or more confrontational strategy may hinge on the state leaders’ choices as they respond to a wide variety of circumstances. As a rising power that still lags behind the United States, China may have good reason to avoid provoking the world’s only superpower into a conflict that could delay its own rise. However, a Chinese leader who gives way to revisionist impulses or makes unrealistic commitments may prefer a costlier and more controversial foreign policy. To understand better the implications of China’s rise, we must take into account the role of the state leaders, as well as the psychological and perceptual factors that affect their evaluation of costs and benefits.

It should be noted that systemic, domestic and individual factors can—and do—interact synergistically. This preliminary study does not suggest that the
tively. See Scobell and Harold, ‘An “assertive” China?’.
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perceptions of the state leaders alone are always responsible for the behaviour of a state at a specific time. Given that the analysis of China’s assertive foreign policy presented here covers only a limited period of time, it is impossible to specify all the expected interactions of the system-, unit- and individual-level explanations. While this study suggests that the aggregate effect of these interactions ought to reinforce inertia in China’s foreign policy, more research is imperative. Such research might usefully explore some of the underlying reasons for the differences (and similarities) between the factors associated with Chinese foreign policy restructuring.