

China's Foreign Ministry: Fit for Purpose in the Era of Xi Jinping, BRI and 'Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics'?

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President Xi Jinping has raised the bar in China's engagement with the world: first, in launching in 2012 the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) as the idiom for intensive eco-political engagement with a wide swathe of states in Asia, Europe and Africa, plus Latin America; and second, in framing heightened global expectations for this self-avowed 'major country' that has moved out of the shadow of Deng Xiaoping's 1989 hide our capacities and bide our time dictum. This places unprecedented demands on the foreign ministry, its diplomatic mission and personnel, and on all the other agencies that make up what we may call the foreign affairs network. The year 2018 has seen several new developments in the institutional structures and the work methods that connect with this enhanced priority to foreign policy implementation. This essay examines the challenges that China currently faces in pursuing its ambitious external objectives, in a fraught international environment and contestation among the world's leading and emerging powers. Domestic challenges in coordinating actions are visible in BRI projects, which are a high national priority. The Chinese foreign ministry now receives better political support, but it remains unclear if this will suffice in meeting the major challenges they face, both abroad and at home—in working with domestic stakeholders.

Keywords: Foreign policy, diplomacy, foreign ministry, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), coordination

INTRODUCTION

Why should we examine the structure and functioning of foreign ministries and embassy network in studying international relations? A simple answer is that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is the hub of a country's foreign policy, that is, the framer, manager and implementing instrument, working through a worldwide network of embassies and

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consulates. This ministry is supervised closely and continually by the head of government and his staff, more than any other ministry in the government; this both adds to its stature and complexifies its relations with the other branches of government.

The MFA is the foreign policy control centre, even while major decisions are taken at higher instances of government. The overseas 'field representatives' operate in greatly varied foreign environments. Each, the ministry and the missions, play roles that appear outwardly different, but are in fact two facets of a single process of formulating, harmonising and delivering that external policy. Consequently, these officials—that is, diplomats—working at headquarters and in missions abroad come from a unified diplomatic service.

At home, the foreign ministry works cheek by jowl with the rest of the national administration. In our globalised world, virtually every entity of a government, and national institutions such as the parliament, sustain their own foreign connections. The foreign ministry has the unenviable task of coordinating with them to harmonise these actions and ensure that these conform to a 'whole of government' posture. It also reaches out to an array of non-state actors—be they chambers of commerce, cultural entities, education institutes, the media, think tanks and all manner of civil society organisations—to project a 'whole of nation' image. In a statist, authoritarian and centralised China, this might appear easier than said in a heterogeneous democratic state, but in any modern, complex governance system, foreign policy harmonisation is a huge challenge. As we see, China faces its own problems.

Diplomatic missions abroad, especially the large ones in major capitals and at places of special importance to the home country like neighbouring countries, display something of the heterogeneity of the home country's administration, with staff drawn from many ministries, ranging from defence attaches representing the armed services to tax and customs staff that keep track of trade and financial flows between the two countries, monitoring enforcement of tax and other regulations. And of course we should not omit the 'undeclared' intelligence personnel, who operate 'under cover', using the embassy as their base for clandestine information gathering activities. These are just a few examples of the state agencies accommodated within embassies; they too pose challenges in implementing unified foreign policy actions.

In *Asian Diplomacy*, I studied the functioning of foreign ministries in China, India, Japan, Singapore and Thailand (Rana 2007). A later essay compared the diplomacy of India and China (Rana 2014). Subsequent events and data, including the 2018 upgrading of China's foreign affairs management system, make it worthwhile to take a fresh look. This also takes into account new published studies, covering China and other countries, in what is still a rather understudied domain, that is, comparative examination of the diplomatic process.¹

¹The first modern comparative examination of the structure and operation of foreign ministries was by Steiner (1982). Other leading works in this genre are Robertson (1998), Hocking (1999); Hocking and Spence (2002) and Robertson and East (2005).

CHINA'S OBJECTIVES

After his elevation as China's national leader in 2012, President Xi Jinping has moved forward to assume the mantle of Mao Zedong, his status elevated by the 19th Communist Party Congress held in 2017, much beyond anything that other leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, had enjoyed. Crowned in effect now as president for life, his doctrine is now hailed as 'Xi Jinping Thought', and he has become the 'core leader'—these appellations evoke the Mao era.

Xi Jinping has taken unprecedented direct control over foreign policy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also called 'One Belt One Road' [OBOR]) was first announced in his 2013 speech at Kazakhstan. It has evolved and gained momentum since then, and remains personally identified with him. Key elements that he advocated in his 2017 Party Congress speech are (Xi 2017):

- 'China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country', he told the 2017 Party Congress. This is a major departure from Deng Xiaoping's 1989 doctrine that China should 'hide its capacities, bide its time and never take the lead'.
- Restoration of 'China's rightful place at the center of the world'.
- Moving far from the 'peaceful rise' doctrine of the mid-2000s, China now emphasises its 'first class military capability'; the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is 'built to fight'.
- China's development presents a new choice for other countries, and is in effect a global model. Xi spoke of 'blazing a trail for other developing countries ... (with) Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving problems'.

The Party Constitution was amended to include OBOR as central to China's foreign and national economic policy.

A rare foreign ministry 'work conference' met on 22–23 June 2018. This was the fifth in the series; previous conferences were held in 1971, 1991, 2006 and 2014.² As in 2014, President Xi delivered a major address:

- He called for 'efforts to break new ground in major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'; this phrase was repeated several times.
- The goal: To 'fulfill the mission of realizing national rejuvenation ... continuously facilitate a favorable external environment for realizing the Chinese Dream'.
- To 'nurture a distinctive style of Chinese diplomacy by combining the fine tradition of external work and the characteristics of times'.

²It is noteworthy that the first two were held in exceptional times: in 1971, after the end of the extreme phase of the Cultural Revolution, when first steps towards normalcy were taken, and in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War.

- ‘Forge ahead the Belt and Road construction in the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration ... the construction of the Belt and Road should be solidified and deepened to elevate the country’s opening up to a new level’.
- China’s aims: To ‘firmly safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and development interests, take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system, and build a more complete network of global partnerships’.
- ‘[D]iplomacy represents the will of the state, and the diplomatic power must stay with the CPC Central Committee, while the external work is a systematic project.’
- He also spoke of ‘putting forward innovations in diplomatic theory and practice, promoting strategic planning, advancing diplomatic agenda globally, safeguarding China’s core and major interests, upholding win–win cooperation and justice while pursuing shared interests, and thinking about worst-case scenarios and risks’. Perhaps this includes an allusion to a Chinese theory of international relations, a notion that some of its scholars have advanced.
- Further, ‘not only observe the current international situation, but also review the past, summarize historical laws, and look forward to the future to better understand the trend of history’.

He called for

... a strong contingent of foreign affairs personnel that are loyal to the CPC, the country and the people and are politically solid, professionally competent and strongly disciplined in their conduct ... (and) improving the living conditions of personnel stationed abroad so as to iron out their concerns and worries. (Xi 2018)

This is in an unprecedented acknowledgement by China’s national leader that the diplomatic establishment faces serious problems, evidently now to be addressed.

Delivering conference concluding remarks, Politburo member and top foreign policy party executive, Yang Jiechi declared that ‘... the most important outcome of this conference is that it established the guiding position of Xi Jinping thought on diplomacy’.

Contrast this with Xinhua’s November 2014 report of President Xi’s ‘Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs’ speech: It had summarised the key points as:

the importance of holding high the banner of peace, development and win–win cooperation, pursuing China’s overall domestic and international interests and its development and security priorities in a balanced way, focusing on the overriding goal of peaceful development and national renewal, upholding China’s sovereignty,

security and development interests, fostering a more enabling international environment for peaceful development and maintaining and sustaining the important period of strategic opportunity for China's development. (Swaine 2015)

In 2014, President Xi said, 'China's dependence on the world and its involvement in international affairs are deepening, so are the world's dependence on China and its impact on China'. He spoke of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. A *People's Daily* commentary had declared: 'We want development, and we need to also let other people develop; we want to safeguard our own security, and we also need to let other people have a sense of security'. In another commentary, many have characterized the 2014 speech 'as a diplomatic manifesto to secure the Chinese dream' (Swaine 2015). The 2014 speech lacked the assertiveness and hubris of 2018. The current reframing of objectives sheds several past concepts.

CHINA'S WAIJIAOBU

China's foreign ministry (Waijiaobu) occupies a modern, 1.38 million sq. ft. high-rise on Beijing's First Ring Road, moving there in 1997 from its earlier Old City location, just off the famous shopping hub, Wangfujing. China maintains 166 embassies, 8 permanent missions and 90 consulates—near identical to the 167 US embassies. In size of diplomatic representation, these two are followed by France (160 embassies), UK and Germany (149), Japan (144), the Russian Federation (143), Brazil (137), Turkey (134) and India (124; Lowy Institute 2017).³ In 2006, China had 143 bilateral embassies besides 3 permanent missions (Rana 2007).

Let us consider this ministry's principal features. Below the foreign minister, there are six vice ministers and four assistant ministers; the senior-most is designated as executive vice minister.⁴ The 'department' (*sz*) is the major unit headed by a director general (ranking below vice and assistant ministers), and one or more deputies; they supervise several 'divisions' (*ke*), each headed by a director, of counsellor or first secretary rank, and one or two deputy directors.⁵ Each *ke* has 12–20 officials. In 2007, there were 25 departments, 6 geographic and the remainder functional (a 'General Office', 'Party Related Affairs', Policy Planning, International and Conference Affairs, Arms Control, Treaty and Law, Protocol, Hong Kong and Macao Affairs, and others). By 2019, the number of departments had grown to 29, typical of foreign ministry growth elsewhere, to deal with the expansion in the diplomatic agenda.

³The Lowy Index, using interactive graphics, presents a wealth of information.

⁴Source: Chinese Foreign Ministry website (accessed on 31 January 2019); the designation of a senior or 'executive' vice minister is a recent practice.

⁵This structure resembles that of the German Foreign Office, where the equivalent to the *ke* is the *referat*.

Almost all diplomats are Communist Party members. While not mandatory, this has long been the custom.⁶ Strong national commitment is a Waijiaobu tradition, fostered by the first Foreign Minister, Premier Zhou Enlai, concurrently at this post from 1949 to 1956, before handing it over to Chen Yi.⁷ President Xi Jinping's June 2018 speech at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs alluded to the Party's tight grip on foreign policy. He reminded Chinese diplomats that they are first and foremost 'Party cadres'.⁸

- The diplomatic personnel strength of the foreign ministry is not officially disclosed. In *Asian Diplomacy*, the ministry's total manpower was estimated at 4,500 (Rana 2007). In a 2014 article, I put it at 6,500 (Rana 2014), learning subsequently that the actual figure was 7,500.⁹ One may estimate that the number has grown since then. The US Department of State has some 11,000. Both countries have very sizeable—one might even say over large—headquarters, relative to the number of diplomats stationed abroad.
- What percentage of the total Waijiaobu personnel are at the headquarters at any time, compared with those in embassies? My estimate is that nearly half are based at Beijing, which gives a relatively low 'headquarter-to-missions' ratio. Comparative research over the past two decades suggests that such situations lead to micro-management from headquarters, and a relative stifling of initiative in embassies (Rana 2013).
- Among large states, China is unique with its single-class diplomatic system, with no 'general staff' category (i.e., personal secretaries, assistants and clerks; support staff exists, providing services such as security, cooking, logistics and technicians). All new entrants work in non-diplomatic rank for 3 or 1 years, depending on whether their academic qualifications are at a bachelors or master's level. They, and those in mandatory 3-year tenures as 'attaches', typically handle back office work.
- In their first 10 years of service, new entrants follow a rigid promotion cycle: 1 or 3 years as non-diplomatic staff, 3 more years as attaches and 4 years as third secretaries. Thus, for 8 or 10 years, until reaching the second secretary rank, each cohort marches in lockstep; thereafter, sharp selectivity kicks in. In a typical annual cohort of 200–300, the few deemed as outstanding receive fast

⁶'Inside Chinese embassies, the ambassador is no longer automatically the CCP branch secretary; The party grip on the embassy has been diluted, but not abandoned.' (Rana 2007). Indirect evidence suggests that Party control is now stronger, and new entrants take up Party membership as a matter of course.

⁷Premier Zhou Enlai, right up to his demise in 1976, retained a degree of personal control over foreign affairs, not replicated by any of his successors.

⁸This is akin to exhortations made to the personnel at other key agencies. Visiting the offices of Xinhua and *People's Daily* in 2016, President Xi had told them that they were comparable to PLA soldiers.

⁹In some 45+ interviews with Chinese diplomats conducted in 2002–6, no one was willing to speak about the number of personnel. But years later, during a conversation, a senior diplomat friend who had stonewalled earlier queries quietly let slip the 7,500 figure.

promotions; years later, that is, aged 40–45 years, they can reach the rank of director general. This method, selective fast promotions after a decade of fixed advancement, is also practiced by Germany. The Waijiaobu applies '360-degree evaluations', current in the corporate world, that is, officials evaluate their direct supervisors. This and other transparent methods make this feasible (Rana 2007). In 1995, an official in his mid-40s, Yang Yichi, was appointed vice minister.

- Ambassadors are in three levels, vice minister, director general and deputy director general, with ranks rigidly attached to specific assignments. Thus, the 10 foreign capitals (including New York) will only get vice minister-rank ambassadors. Germany is among the few countries with a like system.¹⁰ A vast pool of candidates for appointments helps to implement this system. Some consul generals are now internally given ambassador rank, a practice followed by other countries.
- The vast majority of ambassadors are career Waijiaobu professional—the only exceptions are a few provincial officials sent abroad as a reward for those that have headed province-level foreign affairs offices (see in the following).
- Ambassadors successful at key assignments are retained at their posts for long periods. A report noted that 'current ambassadors at China's most prestigious embassies (excluding India) have spent around six years on their posts. In international comparison, this is relatively long ... With (almost) 10 years, China's ambassadors to Russia and the U.K. have served the longest' (Mokry 2018).¹¹ In the past 10 years, Chinese ambassadors at New Delhi, also at vice minister rank, averaged less than three years.
- All 33 Chinese provinces—including the four metropolitan cities with province status (Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai and Tianjin)—maintain 'Foreign Affairs Offices', funded and staffed by the province, acting as Waijiaobu domestic branch offices. For a large federal country, this is an excellent method to involve sub-state entities in external relations, especially in economic promotion and in cultural outreach. Such offices in border provinces help with local aspects of cross-border management.¹² They also handle visits by foreign dignitaries to their region and foreign visits by provincial dignitaries. This decentralises outreach to

¹⁰ In comparison, other foreign ministries apply a less rigid formula, which helps with personnel management.

¹¹ One of the six-article series on China's foreign ministry by researchers of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), Berlin, Germany. The others being Eder (2018), Legarda (2018), Mardell (2018), Herrmann and Mokry (2018) and Weidenfeld (2018).

¹² In 2002, I visited the Foreign Affairs Office in Yunnan province at the state capital, Kunming. With a staff of about 80, it typically handle tasks such as border demarcation with neighbouring Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, as also local-level contacts with that administration. These offices also help with foreign contacts, incoming visits as also the many provincial delegations that are sent abroad. In comparison, Mexico sends foreign ministry diplomats to work in provincial offices. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has now opened a few 'branch offices' in some state capitals.

foreign countries and strengthens the foreign ministry's domestic engagement, both important for a large country.

- Tight discipline controls and inspection processes have been the norm. Currently, Vice Foreign Minister Xie Hangsheng carries the title of Chief Inspector of the Discipline Inspection and Supervision Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the National Supervisory Commission at the MFA.¹³
- A variable retirement age operates. Women retire at 55, as against 60 for men. Those at vice minister rank retire at 65. This is unusual compared with other MFAs.
- Gender discrimination persists. At initial recruitment, an undeclared cap of 25 per cent is applied for women candidates. Even within this 25 per cent limit, the percentage that rises to high rank is low. In 2004, only four ambassadors were women; the 2006 figure rose to seven. A gender glass ceiling persists.¹⁴
- Language specialisation, always strong, is now further strengthened; interpreter-level experts covering over 60 foreign languages and trained at special universities (including the famed 'Beijing Foreign Studies University', teaching 83 languages). They are integrated into the diplomatic service and given incentive payments for their specialisation; that is not the practice in many other foreign ministries, where interpreters form a separate cadre, ranked lower than mainstream diplomats.¹⁵ (Mokry 2018; Rana 2014). The foreign ministry has in-house language expertise in over 60 languages, way ahead of others.¹⁶
- Under Deng's 1979 reforms, the foreign ministry shifted back to specialisation (after the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution which saw Red Guards taking over Chinese embassies, and return to Beijing of all ambassadors, with the exception of Huang Hua in Cairo). The ministry reverted to giving higher

¹³The Chinese Foreign Ministry 'inspectorate' carries an unusual title, 'Office of Leading Group for Conducting Inspections in the Foreign Ministry', indicative of its importance. Major foreign ministries apply similar tight inspection methods for their embassies; in the USA and Canada, embassy inspection reports are published on foreign ministry websites, after redaction. Germany applies a special procedure of all home-based officials stationed abroad sending annual reports on work conditions (Rana 2013). In contrast, the British Foreign Office has wound up its inspectorate. India carries out ad hoc embassy inspections, but has no permanent inspection system.

¹⁴In contrast, the percentage of women ambassadors in India is in proportion to the percentage of women that have qualified for the relevant years. That percentage has progressively risen from around 12 per cent in the 1950s to now over 35 per cent. Unusually for any country, in the past 20 years three women Foreign Secretaries (heads of the service) have held office.

¹⁵Barring the old Soviet bloc countries, and to some extent the USA, few countries can match Waijiaobu's interpreter standard language competence, built into their diplomatic service. Around 1990, emphasis on the study of 'minor' foreign languages (which had personally been steered by Premier Zhou Enlai in the 1950s) weakened, but now it seems to have received fresh impetus. Elsewhere, reports on the British Foreign Office have noted a weakening in foreign language competence among their diplomats.

¹⁶In the past, language specialists were almost exclusively assigned to foreign capitals according to their expertise, which meant that a Burmese speaker would only serve abroad in that country. That policy was eased in the late 1990s to give specialists wider regional experience.

weight to language studies, appointing as envoys those who had risen through the system; in 1982, the first of the post-1949 direct entrants were appointed as ambassadors, that is, after 23 years of service.

- Under the government staff cutbacks implemented in 1993, personnel were reduced by 25 per cent. Simultaneously, gradual reform was implemented—that has remained the policy since, gradual, progressive reform, often with pilot projects to test the results; a sound approach.

Overall, the Chinese diplomatic service is professional with modern personnel management practices and fairly high morale. With a huge manpower base at entry and lower levels, and a sharply tapering pyramid apex, strict selectivity is applied, with the result that officials in their mid-40s rise to ranks of director general and, exceptionally, even vice minister.¹⁷ The promotion process is sufficiently objective and transparent for the system to accept this. A weakness is that with heavy manpower concentration at the ministry at Beijing, micro-management stifles initiative at embassies.¹⁸

KEY CHALLENGES

Training is a high priority, but surprisingly, the foreign ministry does not have its own training institution. According to one Chinese diplomat, under the human resource department there exists 'almost a full department' which is in charge of training.¹⁹ A plan in the mid-2010s to set up a new training institute, adjacent to the new campus of the China Foreign Affairs University on Beijing's 5th Ring Road was not implemented because funds were 'not available'.²⁰ This indirectly reveals the foreign ministry's limited political influence within the government. This situation now may have changed.

New entrants attend a six-month course at the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) (CFAU graduates are exempt). CFAU functions under the Waijiaobu; in 2002, it was raised from its status as a 'college'.²¹ It plays two roles: a teaching institution specialised in international affairs and a training unit for the ministry, a remnant of a Soviet pattern.²² It annually runs two three-month duration courses for ambassadors

¹⁷The selection methods applied were detailed in Rana's (2007) work.

¹⁸This assessment is based on over 30 interviews conducted during 2001–7 with Chinese diplomats and others.

¹⁹Comment made at an informal interview in 2012.

²⁰Information gathered from conversations with different Chinese interlocutors during 2012–5.

²¹In the 1990s, other institutions of higher learning run by different ministries were placed under the Ministry of Higher Education. But CFAU has remained under the foreign ministry. In the nation-wide university entrance exam, the *Gaokou*, CFAU picks the very best students, 'even ahead of Beida (Peking University)', as per a 2002 interview.

²²CFAU annually takes in 400 students for BA, Double BA and Masters courses; some graduates sit for the MFA entrance exam, and make up about 30 per cent of the annual intake.

and senior diplomats, plus a six-week training course for foreign diplomats. Research papers by CFAU's 140-strong faculty go to the ministry, some prepared in response to official requests.

At every major promotion—say to the rank of deputy director, director, director-general or vice minister—passing a training course is mandatory across the entire government system.²³ Each year the foreign ministry selects 140 to attend a one-year course at major world academic institutions—among them Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, Sorbonne and the Vienna Diplomatic Academy—studying a foreign ministry approved subject; tight competition marks the selection process. All ambassadors must attend a three-month training course.²⁴ Unlike other major diplomatic services, China does not use internet-based training, though this is relevant for foreign ministries, given that half or more of their personnel are stationed abroad.

Across the entire Chinese system, structural rigidity has long been the norm. Every major entity, be it in the civil administration or the military, constitutes an autonomous system (*xitong*); its staff and subsidiaries connect directly only with that particular entity. For example, researchers from the Waijiaobu subsidiaries, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and province-level 'Foreign Affairs Offices' (see below) are sent on assignment to embassies abroad. Foreign ministry officials are not sent to work outside its system (though they are assigned to provincial foreign affairs offices), and the ministry in turn does not accept in-placements from counterparts. Such swapping of officials, increasingly the norm in other countries, builds mutual understanding and cooperation.

Some easing is now visible, and researchers from other official agencies are posted to major embassies.²⁵ Now lateral mobility is implemented. For example, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Chao spent a full career in the Commerce Ministry (in its past incarnations: MOFERT, MOFTEC and now MOFCOM, rising to Vice Commerce Minister), gaining extensive experience of economic work in embassies. In 2013 he was appointed Vice Foreign Minister, no doubt strengthening MFA's economic diplomacy.

DEVELOPMENTS IN 2018

The year 2018 witnessed four major developments concerning foreign policy management. China does not lightly experiment with institutional change; this is indicative of higher importance of foreign affairs, plus dissatisfaction with poor coordination and policy execution, especially concerning BRI. We can find indirect supporting evidence

²³This also applies to vice ministers; for those that fail, the promotion is cancelled.

²⁴Starting in the 1950s, China was among the first countries to run training programmes for ambassadors, since the early appointees were drawn from diverse sources, many from the PLA.

²⁵Incidentally, this is an excellent method, using think tanks to build close relations with foreign counterparts and to track their intellectual and research activities.

for this in the BRI-related problems in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and even in Pakistan, and in some African states.

First, China's foreign policy management is now under a Central Foreign Affairs Commission created in 2018, with undisclosed membership. This probably replaces earlier over-lapping arrangements, which clearly were not effective. Earlier, the top coordinating agency has been a 'leading small groups' (LSGs) on foreign affairs, whose work methods were described well in a Swedish study (Jakobson and Knox 2010). Across the government, major areas are supervised through these secretive LSGs, a little like 'cabinet committees' in parliamentary systems, but LSG membership is more broad-based—each has a special secretariat, embedded within the Party apex—and LSG authority is absolute. Fragmentary information about them percolates through press reports and rare studies; for instance, President Xi headed the foreign affairs LSG; it included Premier Li, the ministers of foreign affairs, public security (heading the intelligence agencies), PLA generals and others (Jakobson and Knox 2010). After 2013, former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was director of the general office of this particular LSG.²⁶ There also exists an LSG on Taiwan affairs, and another dealing with national security. It has also emerged that since 2014, there is an LSG on the BRI; it included Politburo Standing Committee members Wang Huning and Wang Yang, plus Yang Jiechi (appointed as Politburo member in 2017), as deputy leaders (Eder 2018). We do not know if these foreign affairs-related LSGs have been folded into the new Central Commission.

Second, a new agency for international cooperation known as China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) has been created: It is to be supervised by the State Council. The State Council's website said that CIDCA has been set up to 'strengthen the strategic planning and overall coordination of foreign aid' (Mardell 2018). Behind that lies the fact that the two ministries concerned, foreign affairs and commerce, have long clashed; the latter enjoyed exclusive control over aid, credits and loans to foreign countries. *Asian Diplomacy* noted,

[t]he 2003 replacement of the powerful economic super-ministry MOFTEC (covering foreign trade and economic cooperation) by the Ministry of Commerce and has also added to the centrality of foreign ministry on the strategic aspects of economic diplomacy, though trade promotion remains with this new Ministry, which means the commercial sections of embassies. (Rana 2007)

That was premature and inaccurate; coordination issues clearly persisted. Another analysis noted that '[o]n the ground, this contest plays out between the Economic and Commercial Counsellors' offices, staffed by MOFCOM personnel, and local ambas-

²⁶ The 2010 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) paper claimed that this office was located in the foreign ministry, but other evidence, including the six-article series in *The Diplomat* of August 2018 affirm that this was located in the Party Central Office.

sadors' (Mardell 2018). After 2012, BRI-related mega investment projects evidently accentuated this dysfunction. This could be behind 'mercantilist' BRI actions, as events in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and elsewhere, as also mismanagement via bribery of foreign partners, poor project choices and capital diversion abroad by Chinese companies. Will CIDCA end malpractices? That is an open question.

Third, key current and former foreign ministry personalities have now gained high Party rank. It has long rankled with Chinese diplomats that their minister did not enjoy a rank customary elsewhere for foreign ministers.²⁷ That impacted on Waijiaobu's relations with other ministries. China's central foreign policy figure is Wang Jiechi. Born in 1950, he had a stellar career in the ministry, became foreign minister in 2007 and was appointed to the 500-strong Party Central Committee. In 2013, he shifted to the State Council, as director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Foreign Affairs Office, with the rank of State Councillor, a high honorific position. In 2017, he was appointed to the Politburo. One would think that that should help Waijiaobu. As for current Foreign Minister Wang Yi, as vice foreign minister in 2007 he was appointed to the Party Central Committee and in 2018, he received the rank of State Councillor. Thus, directly and indirectly, the foreign ministry enjoys higher status than at any time in the past 20 years.²⁸

Fourth, a major conference on 'work conditions on foreign affairs' was held on 22–23 June 2018, attended by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, as noted above. A day later, Chinese ambassadors from all around the world (who had attended the 'work conference') held their own one-day follow-up symposium on 24 June, deliberating on President Xi's directives. A brief report in Xinhua noted that

Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended and addressed the symposium, in which he thoroughly expounded the important significance, scientific connotation and spiritual essence of Xi Jinping's thought on diplomacy, and called for all Chinese diplomatic envoys stationed abroad to utilize it to arm their minds and guide their practice, as well as work with utmost concentration and focus on the implementation (MFA n.d.).

Another Xinhua report noted 'strengthening the party-building and cadre management of diplomatic corps and promoting the relevant reform on the institutions and mechanisms concerning foreign affairs'. Implicit in these remarks, but not mentioned, was President Xi's reference to improving working conditions abroad. Central to this is the problem of comparatively low foreign allowances for embassy officials, which

²⁷ This was said in multiple interviews with Chinese foreign ministry officials. For example, the US State Secretary ranks fourth in line of succession to the US president, coming after the vice-president, the speaker of the house of representatives, and the senate's president pro tempore. Comparable high political status is enjoyed in many other countries where the foreign minister is a senior member of the cabinet.

²⁸ Qian Qichen was a Politburo member while he was foreign minister (1993–8); his successors have not held this rank.

forces family separation, as spouses cannot afford to leave their home country jobs; one consequence has been a rise in low- and mid-level officials leaving the foreign ministry.²⁹ Measures taken in 2018 to raise the Party ranking of top ministry personalities tie in with what is evidently a response to upgrade the foreign ministry.

A central element in the above is stronger Party control over the foreign ministry. A foreign report noted in March 2019 that a month earlier, a former deputy head of the party's powerful organization department, Qi Yu, was appointed as the foreign ministry's party secretary, despite his lack of diplomatic experience; it added that softer (i.e., professional) approaches were being drowned out. This comes from an internet 'China Tip Sheet', dated 7 March 2019.³⁰ It is one more confirmation of a Xi-era trend.

POLICY AND ACTION AREAS

We may now turn attention to the delivery of diplomatic actions. My assessment in 2007 was that

[t]he Chinese policy process is now partly collegial in its inputs, while tightly unified in decision-making on major issues. A multitude of actors contribute to the policy papers—the foreign and other ministries, the think tanks and institutes that belong to various agencies, retired envoys, advisory groups and individuals. One scholar remarked that '[n]o one knows who reads the policy papers I write, but they are read for sure!' (Rana 2007)

The erstwhile LSG on foreign affairs held monthly meetings with the heads of select government-funded think tanks.³¹ The 2010 SIPRI study had spoken of this LSG regularly receiving briefings from Chinese and foreign scholars on different subjects covering foreign affairs and other governance issues. After President Xi assumed office, such LSG meetings with foreign scholars have ended.³²

Political diplomacy: In 2007 I wrote: 'Post-1990...an equal concern is to project the country as a stable, responsible international actor. The hallmarks: caution, prioritized management of key bilateral relationships, and measured innovation' (Rana 2007). That caution, exemplified in Deng's 1989 'hide the light' doctrine, is abandoned. The swift execution in 2013–5 of the South China Sea island grab transformed

²⁹ Source: Private conversations with specialists. Such attrition imposes cost on the foreign ministry as many of those that leave are among the best.

³⁰ This weekly compilation is published on the net by 'Trivium'. See <https://triviumchina.com/trivium-daily-newsletter/>

³¹ This information came from a remark by a Chinese scholar in early 2010—it is hard to imagine comparable regular meetings elsewhere between foreign affairs scholars and national leaders.

³² Source: A 2017 conversation with a leading international Chinese scholar.

scattered tiny islets and rocky shoals into permanent sea bastions bristling with airfields and armaments. This gives China domination over vast sea space within its looping 'nine-dash line', from which it now cannot realistically be dislodged, regardless of the contesting sovereignty claims by several neighbours. China has refuted a 2016 ruling by an international arbitral tribunal invalidating those claims. This has transformed the South East Asia strategic equation (*The Mint* 2018).

The key difference in the post-2012 Xi era is such measured and bold strategic action. It is also exemplified in positions on international issues, lifting past self-imposed reserve. Be it on Ukraine or Syria, China comes out explicitly in favour of its self-interest. Yet, it tends not to take public initiative on international issues, say by offering proposals to resolve conflicts among states. That posture is predicated on a defensive assessment of how a particular issue might play out if it was at the receiving end. Thus, on Russian moves on Crimea and in Ukraine, Beijing has supported Russia, on grounds of sovereignty; this also plays well with its pro-Moscow preferences in relation to the West. Let us see a different example: In November 2017, China came out with a three-point plan said to resolve the Rohingya issue, the flight of Muslim refugees from Myanmar into Bangladesh. But in a matter of months, it became evident that this was no more than a tactical gesture designed to support Myanmar, with no real intent at conflict resolution (Bhatia 2018).

Another example comes from China's initiative to create a special consultative mechanism in Central and Eastern Europe, the '16 +1 Summit', taking the form of an annual summit held in Europe. It is rooted in China's BRI ambitions in Europe, and is unusual in taking direct action that targets a portion of the European Union (EU). Prior to the Sofia July 2018 meeting, Prime Minister Li Keqiang was at pains to explain, disingenuously, that this regional cooperation format was not intended to undermine the EU. But Brussels has looked askance, not accepting such arguments. 'The initiative has recently lost momentum as many of the promised infrastructure and investment projects have been delayed or have failed to materialize, leading to disappointed expectations' (Weidenfeld 2018).

Multilateral diplomacy: This became a priority after the People's Republic of China (PRC) took its seat at the UN in 1971, but China has tended towards caution. For instance, as a Security Council permanent member, it has exercised its veto only on 10 occasions (6 on Syria issues and twice to block UN investigations into the internal situation in Myanmar and Zimbabwe). 'China's ambivalent attitude on securing and sustaining the peace, especially in Asia and Africa, has eroded her credibility as a major power' Further, 'participation in decision-making on the deployment of UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) was till recently low-key. This changed with President Xi Jinping's announcement in September 2015 that China would create an 8,000-strong standby force of troops available for UN PKOs'. It is the only significant contributor to PKOs, from the P-5. India has viewed as short-sighted some actions in dealing with terrorism. '[W]hen dealing with requests for listing terrorists by countries not represented in the UNSC, like the request for listing Masood Azhar of Pakistan,

China has continued with its opaque policy of applying technical holds on such requests ... China is not a member of the 134-strong group of developing countries but, it identifies itself with it which gives it 'the "strategic depth" of numbers in achieving its priorities in economic and environmental negotiations under the UN'. China also seeks for itself a wide support base. One of its key objectives is to maintain the status quo at the UN, especially in its P-5 status, and block reform (Mukherji 2018). China also works hard to get its officials appointed to UN posts, especially in the economic, technological and social areas.

Economic diplomacy: As noted above, the 2003 replacement of the economic super-ministry MOFTEC by the Ministry of Commerce did not improve the Waijiaobu's position, as external economic actions remained with the commerce ministry, that is, aid management and WTO issues. In the past, Chinese embassies seldom supported their business enterprises, including the state-owned, though their activities were monitored and trade-related issues figured in dialogue with foreign partners. That changed in the early 2000s; Chinese diplomats now work with all their companies to overcome local obstacles; commerce ministry officials embedded in embassies handle this work. For example, in September 2006, the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi issued a statement, publicly criticising for the first time the 'discrimination' that Chinese bidders had encountered in Indian port projects (Rana 2007).

Since then, China's economic diplomacy has become far more assertive in support of Chinese enterprises, public and private, pushing their bids for projects and working out special politico-economic arrangements with foreign partners, advancing Chinese politico-economic interests. BRI is now a dominant focus, for economic, political and strategic advantage, and many examples feature in the foreign media where Chinese embassies have batted in support.

And yet, the advent of BRI has produced increasingly dysfunctional actions and the formation in 2018 of the new agency CIDCA, under the State Council, monitored by strong and competent officials. It is unlikely that the real story of the mercantilist, short-sighted and over-aggressive foreign loans disbursed to many BRI project recipients will be disclosed. Be it in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Maldives and elsewhere, especially in Africa, many other messy situations surely await disclosure. The simple fact is that when the BRI funding windows were opened after 2013, the funds sloshing around in pursuit of foreign project investment were too vast; the pressures from the Chinese businessmen seeking both lucrative profits and avenues diverting funds abroad produced a crisis. The 2018 restructuring is a response, probably too late to do more than rectify future investments.

Contestation with Taiwan: PRC has long challenged Taiwan's diplomatic status and has persuaded and pressured countries, especially small states, to switch recognition. It also warns Taiwan not to declare independence, threatening military action. The 'one country two systems' formula applied to Hong Kong has few takers in Taiwan, the more so after the harsh measures applied in the erstwhile British colony. In 2008–16, while Ma Ying-jeou was the Taiwan President, an informal truce had

prevailed in Beijing's efforts to wean away Taiwan's dwindling supporters, but that ended when President Tsai Ing-wen replaced him. In September 2018, El Salvador switched to the PRC, allegedly after Taiwan rejected a demand for US \$20 billion funding for a port project; Taiwan had earlier rejected similar financial demands from Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic and others countries, which found Beijing more responsive. 'The Chinese government is clearly using extreme cheque-book diplomacy to pull Taiwan's allies away' (Lim 2018). By the end of 2018, Taiwan retained recognition from 16 of the UN's 193 member states. Yet, it continues to enjoy visa exemption agreements with 124 states; PRC citizens can only visit 74 countries without visas (Wikipedia 2018).

Cultural diplomacy: Culture has long been a favoured vehicle to build ties abroad; since the 1950s, China routinely sends large troupes of performing artistes across distant regions, in Africa and Latin America, even to countries where it had not established diplomatic relations. But unlike others of the socialist bloc, it did not establish cultural centres. That underwent radical change in the 2000s. Thirteen China Culture Centers (CCCs), established abroad by the culture ministry, were operational in 2012; in 2019 the number was 37, with another 13 to be established by 2020 (*The Economist* 2019b).³³ Starting in 2004, a network of 'Confucius Institutes' (CI) and 'Confucius Corners' was rapidly established, now totalling some 1,000, with the former embedded in foreign universities. Confucius Corners, small collections of books and audio-visual material, are located in high schools. These, nominally run jointly by the host institution and Beijing's Confucius Institute administration called Hanban, are funded by China's education ministry. They focus on teaching the Chinese language and study of themes acceptable to China. The receiving entity provides the physical space and typically allows the Chinese side to veto any activities objectionable to Beijing.

Conceptually, such 'joint' culture centres are innovative; they start operations rapidly. But in practice they are limited to basic actions, such as teaching language, t'ai chi and art; they cannot engage in deeper intellectual exchanges. Xu Lin, head of Hanban revealed that

[i]t can be tricky for us to introduce Chinese culture to countries that hold different values from us, especially when many countries still have certain misunderstandings about China ... each institute has full control over its own management, as long as it remains in line with China's foreign policy. (Center for Public Diplomacy 2015)

This element has led to the well-publicised closures at some leading Western universities. Ivy-league institutions generally do not host them.³⁴ That has not hindered

³³ In 2018, this ministry was renamed 'Ministry of Culture and Tourism'. In 2017, 130 million Chinese tourists travelled abroad and spent US \$117 billion. See <https://www.chinatravelnews.com/article/120312>

³⁴ In 2014, the American Association of University Professors urged the US universities to shut them down (*The Economist* 2019b). But many continue to function.

CI's spread to 120 countries, including many Western universities, which welcome free funding.

Consider another cultural area. Thanks to the excavations carried out in different provinces in the past four decades (a by-product of the cultural stability engendered by Deng's 1979 economic reforms), China's rich history of past empires and kingdoms has been unearthed with dramatic result, of which the 'Army of Warriors' exhibit at Xian is but one example. Most major cities have new museums that house such collections, and this attracts tourists, domestic and foreign. Exchange of permanent museum displays, commencing with Italy, that such 'museum diplomacy' has been novel, impacting on tourism inflows.

Public diplomacy: David Shambaugh (2015) estimated that China spends around US \$10 billion per year on its public diplomacy. This includes funding the China Global Television Network (CGTN), with production centres at two foreign locations besides Beijing; the CIs; and an aggressive foreign scholarship programme for about 25,000 foreign students, besides other cultural actions, by Beijing and the provinces, aimed at winning friends and building soft power. Global indexes that measure such actions, also marketing their own consultancy services, give high rating to China. But objective surveys rank China fairly low despite its massive investments. For example, the soft power index produced jointly by the University of Southern California (USC) Center for Public Diplomacy and the firm Portland; its 2018 report placed China at 27, down from the previous year's 25th position (Center for Public Diplomacy 2018). It places behind smaller states that spend far less on self-promotion.

New 'independent' think tanks—covering international affairs, economic policy and domestic issues—have emerged, reportedly encouraged by President Xi (*The Economist* 2019c). Supported by business entities and individual donors, besides publications that respect the known limits of tolerance, they produce internal (*neibu*) papers that reach the highest levels.³⁵ This becomes a method for the regime to access a wider range of opinion.

One assessment: 'Despite China's considerable investment in public diplomacy is unable to purchase admiration or support for its strategic goals ... various public opinion polls rate China's soft power poorly ... investments public diplomacy programs are not guaranteed to produce soft power gains' (Spry 2017).

Diaspora diplomacy: According to an earlier assessment, 'Chinese communication with its diaspora is seldom openly visible, even in North America where many other countries openly use their overseas communities for home objectives' (Rana 2007). One example is the handling of 600,000-strong Chinese students in US universities (and high numbers in Australia, Canada and the UK); they used to be left to themselves, with few overt actions to 'manage' their behaviour. That is now transformed into tight monitoring of student political actions; a professor at a US university observed that

³⁵ An example: Some call for sharing BRI financing with other countries; some are consulted on announcements relating to the trade war with the US (*The Economist* 2019c).

they are under continual watch.³⁶ Networks of minders, whose actions have drawn the ire of some university administrations, are used, especially in the USA.³⁷

The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office handling diaspora issues is now under the CCP's United Front Work Department. The distinction between *huaqiao* (**descendants** of migrants) and *huaren* (Chinese citizens) is now eliminated in terms of diaspora outreach. That is a practical approach. The more important point is that in Africa, as also in Malaysia and Pakistan, Chinese embassies have been proactive, even vociferous, in safeguarding their interests and reacting to attacks on them. For example, in the Caribbean, seeking easier work permits for migrants, Chinese embassy officials say that we do so much for you; surely you can be flexible in dealing with our compatriots.³⁸

WORK METHODS

Figures on the budget allocations for Chinese ministries are available in sketchy fashion, and reveal rather little. A 2018 analysis concluded that '[i]n 2017 the Foreign Ministry budget was US \$8 billion. China's foreign affairs budget still lags both behind Germany's US \$16.2 billion, and the United States' US \$31.3 billion Between 2003 and 2017, China's foreign affairs expenditures rose at a 14.5 percent compounded annual growth rate (CAGR)' (Herrmann and Mokry, 2018).³⁹ But as noted above, the budget limitations have affected this ministry.

Coordination between ministries and official agencies remains problematic.

It is explicitly mandated that inter-ministerial coordination should be carried out at the level of vice-ministers. In practice many issues are not of sufficient import to be raised to this level; others are too urgent to await these periodic encounters—some meetings take place at intervals of months. This means one cannot pick up a phone and call an official in another agency to resolve an issue, or set up an inter-agency meeting. Foreign embassies sometimes find themselves carrying informal messages from one agency to another, to nudge Chinese partners towards a common standpoint. Chinese interlocutors are surprised at the comparative ease with which other countries are able to establish inter-ministerial teams and coordinate issues of detail at working levels. (Rana 2007)

³⁶ A comment in a confidential exchange.

³⁷ This has been widely reported in the press. A confidential source notes that sometimes Chinese students are summarily withdrawn from US universities.

³⁸ A comment by a Latin American diplomat in a confidential exchange.

³⁹ The annual budget of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in 2019 is Rs.16,061 crore, equal to US\$2.3 billion.

The 2018 creation of the CIDCA shows that these problems have persisted; effective coordination at both ministry and embassy levels may remain an issue.⁴⁰

Negotiation style: India's first negotiating experience with China was in January–April 1954, when a key agreement on Tibet was finalised in Beijing. At the talks, both sides confidently predicted that the treaty would be concluded within two weeks. India was rather badly prepared, no match for the Chinese side which concentrated step by step on each element, largely prevailing, making only minor compromises. It pushed for definitive settlement on each, before proceeding to the next item. It was a relentless, and tightly structured process (Bhasin 2018).

In negotiations Indians would lay all their cards on the table; the Chinese take a much longer time to reveal their true hand. In fact as in Urdu poetry the real kick and twist comes last. In negotiating with China you need patience and perseverance. (Paranjpe 1998)

'Devices used by Chinese negotiators include: First, Appealing to the ego of the individual, hailing them as "old friends", projecting the inference that friends should be accommodating; these avowals of friendship are graded in subtle fashion, as needed. Given its rich history of imperial rule, an arsenal of status-appealing signals is always at hand. Second, suggesting that the Chinese dignitary steering the negotiations may be under threat, unless issues are resolved; this was a method used in the major negotiations with the US in 1972 and 1981–82.⁴¹ Third. "A strategic view is taken of negotiation that views it as a contest, almost like war".⁴² Fourth. The device of making public its principles in the negotiations, leaves "their hands free in the detailed closed negotiations".⁴³ (Rana 2007).

BRI: METAPHOR AND LODESTAR

BRI dominates China's current foreign actions, for economic, political and strategic gains. It also exemplifies the challenges facing China in managing foreign policy. It would be too big a deviation to tackle BRI in detail; it is the object of many studies,

⁴⁰ In the course of dozens of interviews with Chinese diplomats during 2001–7, an expression frequently encountered was that the foreign ministry issued 'instructions' to other ministries and official agencies; some interlocutors acknowledged that they tended not to heed these. One was left with an impression that the very notion of instructing other agencies showed a mindset that undermined joint actions.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, p. 71–2. In 1972, it was the normalisation issue when 'Zhou Enlai's standing was suggested to be on the line ... In 1981–82 Deng Xiaoping repeatedly told American visitors that he would be in trouble' if US arms sale to Taiwan issue was not resolved.

⁴² Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, p. 87.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 87.

including my article of 15 December 2018 (Rana 2018). At home, it serves to find new markets for Chinese capital goods, rebalance development of its interior, deal with its quasi-landlocked situation and espouses entrepreneurship. With the 70-odd countries that are now formal BRI partners, it solidifies eco-political links and wins long-term support by projecting China as a global development financier. In a contrary view, 'questions have been raised ... whether Beijing can afford the US\$1 trillion it has committed to infrastructure projects and its partners can afford the debt they are taking on. Some fear BRI could be a Trojan horse for global domination through debt traps' (Adhikari 2018).

Many critics challenge the logic of BRI investments, but countries hosting projects see the positives:

1. They have few other sources to fund capital projects, which typically have low economic returns, but large social gains, such as rail projects.
2. They are locked into long-term reliance on Chinese technology and spare parts, but they do not find any problem with this, dependent as many are on imported capital goods.
3. They tend not to object to an influx of Chinese labour and consumer goods, though it is likely to undermine domestic production; that may not yet be an issue.
4. A debt trap is often mentioned. But take the example of Sri Lanka; it gave on a 99-year lease 70 per cent of the Hambantota port, as it could not meet debt repayment. Laos and the Maldives also face crippling debt interest payment (Adhikari 2018). Notwithstanding, one assessment is that Sri Lanka still views its relationship with China as 'necessary and desirable'.⁴⁴ In contrast, Malaysia has remained firm in annulling the US \$20 billion East Coast Rail Link project, after Mahathir Mohamad was elected prime minister in May 2018 (*The Economist* 2019a).
5. China is creating global public goods that will benefit trade flows and other economic connections, especially for landlocked regions.

But problems exist, some low on the horizon. A brief summary on this as follows: (a) Most projects are not 'bankable' in conventional terms, that is, their financial viability is in question. (b) Without competitive bidding, the project cost is inevitably higher than optimal. (c) No real assessment is made of the ability of the recipient to repay loans. (d) No transparency on the terms of lending. This means rather higher charges than normal. (e) Most projects are driven by Chinese companies, private or state-owned; they hide the 'rent' charged by foreign leaders and their associates, which is of course added to the projects. (f) Successor governments, as in Malaysia or the Maldives may repudiate the arrangements.

⁴⁴These words come from a confidential assessment by a delegation that visited Sri Lanka in 2018.

Several conclusions flow from this. First, the early BRI projects commencing in 2013, showed inexperience, unfamiliarity with major project management and a short-term mindset, often tainted with payment of bribes to local officials and politicians. Such malfeasance grew so large that it reached levels of public scrutiny in different countries, and damaged China's reputation. Now the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is trying to help China acquire the needed project management skills (Clover 2018). The new supervisory structures created in 2018 are a response.

Second, the sums of money involved are enormous, even for a country that had over US \$3 trillion in the reserves in 2012. It would be an error to assume that the Chinese public may forever close their eyes to the misuse of public funds that has taken place. One cannot predict how this might develop in the future, but public complacency can last forever. That gets us to the much wider issue of regime permanence and the future of the Chinese Communist Party. Without offering predictions, this clearly bears reflection.

Third, managing very large BRI projects in different foreign countries means that China has to deal with varied local situations, political shifts, elections and varying environments that evolve continually; foreign countries have a finite capacity to influence events. In earlier articles, I had argued that Chinese diplomacy will have to deal with foreign situations; it cannot stick to its earlier posture of non-involvement in domestic politics and power struggles in foreign states. This has already happened, whether in Sri Lanka, Maldives or Malaysia. When Prime Minister Mahathir came back to power in Malaysia at the end of 2017, he exposed the China-induced corruption of his predecessor, Abdul Razak. Another example is,

While China seems to have initially endorsed Rajapaksa's return with the Chinese ambassador calling on him, Beijing too distanced itself from the political turmoil later. Chinese officials attributed the endorsement to what they described as 'inexperience of the ambassador'. They added that China was willing to work with any leader and it had no favourites. (*The Times of India* 2018)

With the volumes of money at stake, can any diplomatic system navigate a path, remaining untainted and insulated from local politics and that environment?

Fourth, the situation is compounded by the rapacity of Chinese companies that have exploited BRI projects, with cost inflation and large illegal diversion of funds into personal accounts. How can this be rationalised after the event and cleaned up, when all kinds of issues are exposed to public scrutiny? President Xi's major anti-corruption programme thus connects with BRI.

One evaluation,

China equally needs to make haste slowly, to temper its vaulting ambition and premature triumphalism over an imagined global glory: it too is plunging into uncharted treacherous waters with its Belt-and-Road Initiative which conceivably

could overstretch its economic reach, embroil it in bilateral and multilateral political contestations, thereby undermining the sustainability of its national trajectory. (Saith 2019)

Unlike at home, China cannot steer or 'manage' the external environment.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

WHERE DOES ALL THIS LEAVE THE CHINESE MFA?

One view is that for all the positive changes, the foreign ministry has not really gained; perhaps high leaders and the ministry's peers do not want it to gain clout. My impression is that the problems with BRI created a situation that had to be addressed, but the new agencies, the Central Commission and the aid supervisor CIDCA might not radically improve matters. Chinese companies, state-owned and private, are accustomed to working through the commerce ministry and other economic actors; the MFA cannot match or replace that.

Until 2018, Chinese embassy oversight of foreign projects was the remit of commerce ministry officials stationed abroad, while professional diplomats handled the bilateral political relationship. Clearly, that dual management did not work. Will the new Central Foreign Affairs Commission and aid agency CIDCA establish new harmonised actions on the ground? A speculative January 2018 news report spoke of China empowering ambassadors and reducing staff in embassies from other agencies, but ground evidence does not support this information (Bloomberg 2018).

China's efforts to strengthen foreign affairs management brings out a major point that is seldom noted. In the past two decades, in our globalised, connected world, the action canvas for external action has expanded exponentially. Consequently, advancing the country's external interests takes place across a very broad front, especially for a nation determined to carve larger space on the global stage. That involves managing complex sets of intermeshing political, economic, societal, cultural, educational, public policy and other objectives. It can be effective only through the participation and harmonisation of virtually the full set of government agencies, quasi-state entities, plus non-governmental actors. We call this a 'whole of government' approach, but in reality this amounts to mastering even more complex 'whole of nation' actions. China is not alone among rising powers to pursue the ambition of an expanded role in international affairs. The Chinese system seemingly lacks the means for such a role.

Because of the critical importance of external affairs in the national advancement of a modern state, the foreign ministry should not be merely seen as a typical ministerial entity within the government structure. It is, or ought to be, the empowered

manager–coordinator of the totality of external actions, across the board. China is now trying to do this through its Central Foreign Affairs Commission, supplemented with matching actions. Other coordinating methods exist; one of the simplest is through continual oversight by the office of the head of government, with the head personally engaged in pushing ministries and agencies to work jointly. One persisting problem is that while such apex-directed coordination may appear to function at the top, it does not ensure that those implementing ground-level actions work in harmony. To put it another way, in China foreign policy coordination at a strategic level has probably improved, but the problems of coordination at a tactical or implementation level persist. That brings us back to the efficacy and empowerment of the foreign ministry and the diplomatic apparatus. The jury is still out whether the attempts at harmonising actions by different agencies and stronger Party oversight will work.

Across the Chinese government, the pervasive Party system both underpins and overrides official institutions. Does that exceptional structure—which has no match today anywhere—add to the efficiency of its diplomatic system? The answer is unclear, and rather subjective. For one thing, it probably speeds policy execution and ensures uniformity of actions. But the international relations management paradigm is that each situation is unique, embedded in its particular circumstances. That demands responses predicated on many variables; standardised actions do not serve. That is a constraint for an otherwise agile and disciplined system as obtained in China.

Globally, the management of bilateral relations, which accounts for over 80 per cent of foreign ministry diplomatic activity, is witness to a new trend. Alert foreign ministries—including those in Canada, Germany and the UK, among others—have now effectively made their embassies the ‘co-managers’ of each bilateral relationship (Rana 2013). That kind of partial ‘devolution’ or sharing of authority does not work in the Chinese ethos. An over-large foreign ministry and the creation of new and complex Party-government structures, like the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, also conditions that. So in brief, Chinese diplomacy loses suppleness, at a time when BRI creates situations where the external country situations, not amenable to Beijing’s control, require creative local actions. Standard template enforcement fails.

Let me end with a speculative thought. Professional diplomatic services consist mainly of outstanding individuals, located often within a national system that tends not to like much the foreign ministry. That is the fate in countries where MFA personnel are meritocratic elites, who operate in conditions that are different from national administrative ethos, in which civil servants at all levels work far more closely with their political masters, plus business and other agencies. That involves compromise and adjustment to domestic pressures, which is largely missing in the diplomat’s work environment. For that reason they are a caste apart, sometimes admired, but more often disliked, envied or viewed as irrelevant. These elements are visible in China, as in India and in Western countries as well. This hypothesis needs further examination.

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