The Historian's Gaze
Essays on Modern and Contemporary China
in Honour of Guido Samarani
edited by Laura De Giorgi and Sofia Graziani

A 'Multi-Voice' Choir. Making Foreign Policy in Post-Maoist China

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Abstract As a result of the People's Republic of China's increasing interdependence with the global arena and developing foreign policy interests, the Chinese foreign policy-making process has witnessed the emergence of a growing number of actors who wish to 'have a say' and attempt to influence the top leadership's decisions. In this process, while the Chinese Communist Party, and in particular its highest body (the Politburo Standing Committee), has retained ultimate decision-making power, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed its 'secondary role' as merely one actor 'among the others,' and not necessarily the most important one.

Keywords Post-Maoist China. Chinese Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy Decision-Making. Traditional actors. Non-Traditional actors. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1 Introduction

As China rises as a world superpower and wants to have a greater say on international issues, whether on security, climate, or global governance, it becomes crucial to try to understand its foreign policy decision-making process, and above all the actors involved in the process. For many years after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded, the way this process functioned remained almost unintelligible, and most scholars and analysts "had to piece together snippets of information to identify the actors and institutions in China's foreign policy apparatus" (Zhao 2020, 85).

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Sinica venetiana 10
e-ISSN 2610-9042 | ISSN 2610-9654
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-723-4 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-724-1

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2022-07-26 | Accepted 2022-12-07 | Published 2023-10-11

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-723-4/010

The initiation of the 'Reform and Opening-up policies' (*Gaige Kaifang Zhengce* 改革开放政策) in the late 1970s represented a turning point for contemporary China. The country opened up to the world through a process of growing international involvement, and scholars were given new opportunities to study China's foreign policy decision-making process. While a lack of transparency and high level of secretiveness remained huge barriers, scholars have been able to collect more information, both directly from Chinese publications and from insiders in the Chinese system (mainly retired Chinese diplomats), and put together an increasingly accurate (or at least less confused) picture of the Chinese foreign policy-makers and their interactions with bureaucratic institutions. From Doak Barnett's studies of China's foreign policy institutions (1985) to the studies of the country's foreign policy process by Lu Ning (1997) and those on the effects of various factors on its external behaviour from different perspectives (Lampton 2001; Hao, Su 2005; Rozman 2012; Zhang 2016) and the challenges of Chinese foreign policy decision-making (Yun 2013), to the most recent studies by Zhu Zhiqun (2020), David Shambaugh (2020), Shaun Breslin (2021), and Peter Martin (2021), research on Chinese foreign policy decision-making has proliferated. These studies have made a major contribution towards advancing academic understanding of Chinese foreign policy decision-making mechanisms and bringing out the role played by a myriad of actors, in addition to the Party-state, which maintains the key role as the final decision-maker, and well beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) – the government agency that is officially responsible for State diplomacy – thus challenging the conventional wisdom that China is a unitary player in international affairs.

China's authoritarian political system gives the Party-state and its paramount leaders immense power in the making of policy, including foreign policy. Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping are the three most powerful paramount leaders in the history of the PRC, and they have played a fundamental role in Chinese foreign policy over the years, contributing to transforming it from a revolutionary diplomacy to a developmental diplomacy, and then to a big-power diplomacy (Zhao 2020, 86). As Xi Jinping (2017) himself pointed out at the Nineteenth CCP National Congress in October 2017, while Mao made the Chinese people stand up (*zhan qilai* 站起来), and Deng made them prosper (*fu qilai* 富起来), he was going to make China strong (*qiang qilai* 强起来).

It was precisely by virtue of the fact that Mao was viewed as the 'saviour' of the country, who restored its long-desired sovereignty, unity, and independence and put an end to the notorious 'century of shame and humiliation' (*bainian chiru* 百年耻辱), that he always had the first and last word in all matters pertaining to both domestic and foreign politics. For Mao, in fact, there was no such thing as an insignificant matter in diplomatic affairs, and everything had to be

reported to and decided by the Central Committee. As such, the role of the Foreign Ministry, which was headed by Premier Zhou Enlai from 1949 to 1958, was defined as "keeping the central leadership well informed of China's external situation and carrying out the central leadership's decisions" (Chen 2001, 10-12).

Emerging from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping played a critical role in transforming the country by downsizing the role of ideology and placing a strong emphasis on the modernisation of the country's economy and its opening up to the world, in order to transform China into an active member of the international community. Despite the fact that he was never the Party's General Secretary/Chairman and held no other top government positions – he 'only' controlled the military as Chairman of the Central Military Commission –, he had great authority because of his personal stature, connections, and extensive experience. In terms of foreign policy decision-making, Deng's model had much in common with the one used under Mao, as both shared a distinctly authoritarian characteristic. However, while power-making under Mao was characterised by vertical authoritarianism, under Deng it gradually evolved into a horizontal form (Zhao 1992). To replace the previous one-man model, Deng initiated a decentralisation process to delegate authority to the bureaucracy and sought to build a 'collective leadership' (*jiti juece* 集体决策)[1] with a group of senior leaders making decisions jointly, as Reform and Opening-up expanded the Chinese foreign policy agenda and brought an increasing number of players into the foreign policy decision-making process. Nonetheless, key national security decisions remained a privilege that was reserved for Deng personally.

When Xi Jinping arrived at Zhongnanhai and consolidated his power – by reducing the PBSC from nine to seven members, abolishing the term limit on his presidency, and eliminating his rivals through a harsh anti-corruption campaign – the 'collective leadership' quickly became a distant memory. In fact, Xi rapidly concentrated immense power in himself as the 'core' (*hexin* 核心) of the leadership,[2] and immediately abandoned Deng's low-profile diplomacy in favour of a pro-active big-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aimed at transforming the mission of PRC's diplomacy, from setting a peaceful environment conducive to domestic development to one that pushes for the expansion of the country's global reach, with the ultimate goal of achieving the so-called 'China dream of the great rejuvenation

1 A truly collective leadership was only implemented after Deng's retirement in the early 1990s. His successors did not have Deng's personal authority, and thus played a role of *primus inter pares* among the members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) (Zhao 2020, 88).

2 A title assigned to Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin, but not to Hu Jintao.

of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing de zhongguo meng* 中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦).

Much has been written about the process of centralisation of power in the hands of Xi Jinping. For the purposes of this essay, it is important to underline that this shift has contributed to the creation of a common global perception that the leadership of the CCP under Xi dictates the country's foreign policy agenda. This is true only in part, however: in fact, Chinese political decision-making is currently driven by a range of interests and shaped by different stakeholders. Thus, while Xi Jinping has accumulated enormous power comparable only to that of the 'Great Helmsman', there are other actors with varying degrees of autonomy and ability to intervene in the foreign policy decision-making process. In other words, while acknowledging the role of the CCP and its paramount leader in critical foreign affairs decisions, the reality is that such decisions are often the result of "seeking the broadest consensus among a myriad of actors" (Yu, Ridout 2021, 2).

The body of literature on China's pluralistic decision-making in foreign affairs is growing steadily, but it is still limited compared to the very many people who see China as a monolithic entity, due especially to the fact that the specificities of the Chinese system and the complexities of the decision-making process in Beijing's political establishment remain difficult to investigate, especially for non-Chinese speakers. The reality is actually quite different: China's approach to foreign policy became increasingly pluralistic under Deng Xiaoping, whose administration introduced landmark economic reforms that led to decentralisation across all types of policy-making at both the national and provincial levels. In particular, the new Constitution adopted in 1982 redefined the prerogatives of central and local governments and increased the agency of provinces in the Chinese political economy. A good example of this is the central government's decision to allow local governments to commit to large-scale investment projects without first receiving authorisation (Yu, Ridout 2021, 13). Consequently, many provinces, especially those on the coasts and borders, began to use their limited autonomy to engage directly with foreign governments and major multinational corporations, signing commercial agreements, attracting foreign investments, and enhancing their international profiles (Chen, Jian 2009, 6).

As a result of the PRC's increasing interdependence with the global arena and its growing foreign policy interests, the Chinese foreign policy decision-making process has seen the emergence of a plurality of actors who want their voices to be heard and to attempt to influence the top leadership's decisions. This list includes both governmental and non-governmental actors, from Leading Small Groups

(LSGs)[3] to various ministries, and from the business sector – mainly energy companies and financial institutions – to research groups, think tanks, netizens, and NGOs, resulting in a "cacophony of voices" (Jakobson, Knox 2010, vi). In this process, while the Communist Party, in particular its highest body (the Politburo Standing Committee), has retained the ultimate decision-making power, the MFA has confirmed its "secondary role" as merely one actor "among others", and not necessarily the most important (Jakobson, Knox 2010, VI).

Owing to space limitations, this essay will deal with only the most relevant new actors (sub-national governments, businesses, research institutes and think tanks, and netizens), and reflect on the growing marginalisation of the MFA to the benefit of other ministries and government agencies. Finally, it will seek to reflect on the dysfunctions that the presence of so many actors and voices might cause in Chinese foreign policy decision-making and assess the current situation, which sees China as a world superpower that wishes to secure a growing say in global governance.

2 The Emergence of New Players in the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process

In his 2013 study on how China is walking the path towards becoming a major power, David Shambaugh (2013, 62) identified five concentric circles in Chinese foreign policy decision-making that have emerged in recent decades: senior leader, ministries, intelligence and research institutions, local governments and corporations, and society. More specifically, other scholars have distinguished between traditional and non-traditional actors or governmental and non-governmental actors (Jakobson, Knox 2010; Hao, Su 2005, 20; Lanteigne 2019, ch. 2). The former include the top leadership – namely, the PBSC, the State Council ministries, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which coincides with Shambaugh's first two circles – while the latter refers to sub-national governments (provinces and metropolitan cities with provincial status), business entities (the powerful State-Owned Enterprises, SOEs), research institutions and think tanks, and well-informed, and increasingly active, social groups and netizens.

As far as sub-national governments are concerned, in addition to the above, there is a vast body of literature that recognises the role played by provinces and cities with provincial status in the formulation and implementation of important foreign affairs-related

3 LSGs (*lingdao xiaozu* 领导小组) are *ad hoc* bodies of the CCP charged with decision-making in major functional issue areas that since the 1950s have operated effectively as inter-agency executive committees, cutting across government, the Party, and military systems.

policies. In particular, Audrye Wong (2018) has identified three main mechanisms of influence in order to show the extent to which provincial-level governments are able to influence the formulation and implementation of foreign policy – carpetbagging, resisting, and trailblasing –, and uses important case studies focussing on Shanghai, Yunnan, and Shaanxi to demonstrate how local governments shape foreign policy through the economy, security, and soft power respectively. Many coastal and border provinces are particularly active in some of the most relevant areas of Beijing's foreign policy agenda, as demonstrated by the research carried out by both Chinese and Western scholars on the African continent and in the Arctic, South-East Asia, and the BRI, where sub-national governments play a significant role as traders, project builders, investors, and aid providers (Chen, Jian 2009; Duggan 2020; Kossa 2020; Hao, Su 2005, chs 9-10; Summers 2021). Provincial governments are also active in conducting informal diplomacy, especially with those countries with which China has no formal diplomatic relations, or where high-level contacts have been suspended (Lampton 2001, 105; Zhao 2020, 105).

Other new key stakeholders in Beijing's foreign policy formulation and implementation are the centrally-controlled SOEs, whose involvement in foreign policy ranges from BRI investments to provocative initiatives in the South China Sea (SCS) (Yu, Ridout 2021, 3). While the conventional wisdom is that these enterprises are acting on behalf of the central state, the reality is that their commercial interests do not always coincide with the state's agenda (3). A good example of this is the role played by the largest Chinese oil companies – Sinopec, the China National Petroleum Corporation, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation –, which have consistently blocked Beijing's efforts to form a Ministry of Energy (Downs 2012). Similarly, China's five largest utility companies (in terms of assets and installation capacity), which are also known as the 'Big Five',[4] have vehemently resisted setting carbon emission quotas in the past because they would have been detrimental to their interests. Furthermore, their reluctance to cooperate with Beijing over setting emission targets has slowed the delivery of the PRC's domestic climate policy agenda (Yu, Ridout 2021, 10-11), and risks compromising Xi Jinping's commitment to make China carbon neutral by 2060. In other cases, they have opposed Beijing's joining the United Nations and other countries in the application of sanctions against specific countries (Iran and North Korea), since any sanctions would hurt their commercial interests (Zhao 2020, 105). In recent years, the interests of China's SOEs have also begun to diverge from those of the Party. It

4 The Huaneng Group, the Huadian Group, the China Energy Investment Corporation, the State Power Investment Corporation and the Datang Group.

is worth mentioning here that SOEs have an unusual structure: they are a hybrid between a corporate organisation and a government ministry, and their leaders are appointed to a rank equivalent to a State Council minister or provincial governor, which partly explains why their relationships to the Party and/or the central government apparatus are not submissive (Yu, Ridout 2021, 9-13).[5]

With China's expanding global diplomatic network and the increasingly complex nature of its international relations, Chinese Party-state leaders began to feel the need to have more information, analysis, and advice in order to be able to correctly 'assess, advance, and safeguard' the country's interests. In fact, many ministries lacked the appropriate expertise to deal with the challenges that had accompanied the active international expansion of Chinese activities. They therefore increasingly turned to research institutions and academia for consultation (Jakobson, Knox 2010, 34). The public and internal writings of academics and intellectuals may not only offer expertise on specific issue areas. Still, they can also provide a window through which foreign ideas and international and domestic debates are channeled to top decision-makers. Two volumes published in 2019 offer exciting insights into the influence exerted by scholars – in particular, International Relations (IR) scholars – in the decision-making process of Chinese foreign policy.[6] According to Feng Huiyun, He Kai, and Yan Xuetong (2019, 4), there is no causal and linear link between Chinese IR scholars and policy-makers. Instead, they suggest the existence of at least four different types of relationships between the two parties and propose four models to theorise the potential roles that Chinese IR scholars can play in formulating the country's foreign policy. These four models are the epistemic community model, the 'free market' model, the signaling policy model, and the mirroring policy model. In the first model, scholars may actively influence China's foreign policy as part of an epistemic community. In the second, scholars may provide intellectual products in a free market of ideas that policy-makers can refer to when making decisions. In the third model, scholars may play a policy-signaling role in facilitating the government's test of controversial ideas before the formalisation and adoption of new policies. Finally, in the fourth, scholars can serve as a mirror to reflect the underlying transformations of Chinese foreign policies and domestic politics as well (Feng, He, Yan 2019, 9-15).

5 A case in point is offered by Lee Jones and Zou Yizheng (2017) and concerns the China Power Investment Corporation and its Myitsone hydroelectric dam project in Myanmar. In this case, a central SOE has clearly challenged and subverted central regulations, to the detriment of Sino-Myanmar state relations.

6 See Feng, He, Yan 2019 and Feng, He, Li 2019.

With regard to think tanks, while the PRC has renowned research institutes dating back to the Maoist and early Denghist eras, the use of the term *zhiku* 智库 ('think tank') to refer to policy research centres and institutes has gained popularity in fairly recent times, more precisely since Xi Jinping called for building "Chinese-style think tanks". The "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform" adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP on 12 November 2013 called for strengthening a "new style think tank with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku* 中国特色新型智库) and improving the policy advisory system.[7] This was the first time the term 'think tank' had been mentioned in an official document, and in response to the call, all the leading research institutes and think tanks in the country engaged in a process of 'modernisation', with the ultimate goal of transforming themselves into "high-level quality research institutes with considerable international influence" (Menegazzi 2021, 2).

It is important to underline the fact that most of the important foreign policy think tanks in China – such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) – have always operated, and continue to operate, within the bureaucratic hierarchy, and are administered by CCP organs, the State Council, ministries, or the PLA (Jakobson, Knox 2010, 38).[8] This has important implications, because their government affiliations and orientations limit their ability to provide objective policy recommendations, especially where the research results go against official policy views. It may be superfluous to highlight the fact that genuinely independent think tanks (in a Western sense) cannot exist in an authoritarian state like the PRC because the public dissemination of what the authorities consider to be unsanctioned thought is not tolerated (Jakobson, Knox 2010, 39). This lack of autonomy represents the most significant limitation for Chinese think tanks (Godement et al. 2016), despite a proliferation that has led some observers to refer to a "golden age" of think tanks (Tang 2014), and a general recognition of their important role in Chinese foreign policy. Along with their traditional activities – submitting internal reports and references to the top leadership and Party-state agencies, and presenting in-person advice through lectures and briefings –, they host a myriad of public

7 Cf. https://china.usc.edu/decision-central-committee-communist-party-china-some-major-issues-concerning-comprehensively.

8 In more recent years, non-governmental think tanks have also emerged, but they have sought to undertake research projects commissioned by the government and to serve the government's needs. The most influential among them is the Center for China and Globalization (CCG).

events, organise conferences and activities, and attend high-level forums and summits, thereby contributing towards greatly enhancing China's public diplomacy (Menegazzi 2021, 13-14, 16). In this sense, they are emerging as essential actors in Chinese foreign policy and diplomatic practices, as revealed by numerous studies that focus on the role played by think tanks both in general (Shambaugh 2002; Zhu 2013; Abb 2015; Menegazzi 2018; Tan, Li 2018) and, in particular, on specific issues and regions (Liao 2006; Hua 2017).

At present, China is near the top of the world ranking for the number of think tanks (1,413), surpassed only by the US (2,203) (McGann 2021, 44), and some figure in the list of the top ten and top twenty think tanks in the annual *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* published by James McGann. In the most recent *Report*, which came out in January 2021, the CICIR ranked 9th in the "Top Think Tanks Worldwide" (which does not take the US into account), and 18th in the list that includes the US; the CASS ranked 24th in the first list and 38th in the second (McGann 2021, 55, 64).

As for netizens, it is an undeniable fact that both the media revolution that has taken place in the country over the past 40 years, and the spread of Internet use among the Chinese public over the past two decades have substantially transformed the way Chinese citizens and their rulers communicate in general. In fact, while the media were previously a tool that was exclusively available to officials, with the advent of the Internet, interest groups and citizens can also use the media and the Internet to influence both public opinion and each other. In December 2020, the PRC had the world's largest number of Internet users – 988.89 million – and 60% of Internet penetration; at the same time, it had 731 million online news consumers, with 726 million accessing news on their mobile devices (Lai Lin 2022; *Xinhua* 2020). The dramatic spread of use of the Internet has greatly accelerated the speed at which both domestic and international news reaches ordinary citizens. The new instruments adopted by Chinese leaders and institutions to communicate with international and domestic audiences (especially the state-backed press and its Facebook and Twitter accounts)[9] have contributed towards amplifying the spread of information. That said, it must be underlined that even though the Internet does not affect the foreign policy decision-making process directly (Yang 2016), the Chinese authorities have started to make "listening to the public" a regular procedure (Hong 2016, 98), as ordinary citizens are increasingly voicing their opinions on the Internet. This is

9 Despite their ban in China, the importance of both Facebook and Twitter in the Chinese media sphere is enormous. The Chinese public accesses them via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or through the highly popular social media platforms WeChat and Weibo, where tweets summarising official press conferences or other important events are widely shared.

especially true for specific areas of the Chinese foreign policy agenda, such as North Korea (Scobell et al. 2019), the two Koreas (Gries 2012), the US (Zhang, Xiao 2018), and nationalism directed at (but not limited to) Japan (Shen, Breslin 2010). In fact, the Chinese government is careful when it comes to considering the mood of the Chinese people, which is largely expressed through the Internet, riding the wave in some cases, and blocking expressions of anger in others where they might harm the country's interests, with an awareness that dissatisfaction within society might give cause the Party's ability to govern to be questioned (Jakobson, Knox 2010, 41-6).

3 The Marginalisation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Following globalisation and the increase in China's international activities, nearly every ministry in the Chinese state system has developed some form of interest in foreign affairs. Jakobson and Manuel (2016, 105), for instance, have reported the example of maritime affairs, which in the last few decades has attracted attention from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the Ministry of National Defence, the Fishery Administration under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the State Oceanic Administration under the Ministry of Land and Resources (MLR), the Maritime Safety Administration under the Ministry of Transport (MOT), the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the General Administration of Customs, the Ministry of Science and Technology (MST), the National Tourism Administration, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and, ranked above them all, the National Development and Reform Commission, which is responsible for economic development in general and resources in particular. To this long list they also add the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, which oversees the major state-owned enterprises, including oil companies. Other authors have focussed on the prominent role played by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) compared to other ministries (starting from the MFA) and national commissions on specific issues (foreign trade negotiations, development assistance) or particular regions. As reported by Yu Jie and Lucy Ridout (2021, 7), bureaucratic disputes frequently erupt over development assistance between the MOFCOM, as the executor of development projects, and the MFA, the chief implementer of the PRC's foreign policy, each of which adopts its own specific point of view when proposing new development assistance projects or loans. Indeed, the Chinese aid system is characterised by persistent fierce competition involving not only the two ministries concerned, but also the Ministry of Finance and

the companies responsible for implementing Chinese aid projects (Zhang, Smith 2017; Varral 2016).[10]

In Africa, the MOFCOM plays a far more influential role than the MFA when it comes to dealing with the direction of Beijing's foreign policy towards the continent. In general, the former has 'usurped' some of the MFA's traditional responsibilities. This is especially true in the case of the disbursement of concessional loans (Corkin 2011, 68). Similarly, in the Arctic, the MFA is only 'one' of the ministries in a leading position to coordinate and represent China's Arctic endeavours. In addition to the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) – formerly the State Oceanic Administration under the now-defunct MLR –, many other ministries and agencies strive for influence in the region, from the MST to the MOFCOM, and from the MOT to the China Meteorological Administration (CMA). No less important is the growing role played by the PLA and its navy (Kossa 2020, 27).

One of the reasons behind the MFA's diminishing and diluted authority over the past few decades is the lack of political status accorded to the State Councillor for Foreign Affairs. In fact, the specialisation and professionalisation process required by the reform policy has led to a paradoxical reduction of the political status (Zhao 2020, 96). During the eras of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the Foreign Minister (FM) was reduced from being a member of the Politburo and Vice-Premier to just Vice-Premier and a State Councillor. After many years of decline, however, the political status of the FM was finally enhanced, at least symbolically, with the promotion of Yang Jiechi – China's top-ranking career diplomat – to the Politburo in October 2013. Yang was the first former FM to reach this level in two decades. Wang Yi, the current FM, was also appointed as a State Councillor at the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018 – another first in decades (Zhao 2020, 96). Both appointments were fairly closely aligned with Xi Jinping's vision of consolidating foreign policy decision-making at the top level of the Party. Reforms of the MFA began in early 2017, and were encouraged to "forge a politically resolute, professionally exquisite, strictly disciplined foreign affairs corps", and to create a more empowered diplomatic corps and a more consolidated diplomatic structure that more effectively represented China's interests "with one voice" as the country approached the centre of the world stage (Zhao 2020, 97). The aim of centralising the foreign policy decision-making process was to give the CCP and Xi Jinping himself

10 According to Kishan Rana (2019, 203), tensions between the MOFCOM and the MFA were also behind the decision in 2018 to create a specific agency to strengthen the strategic planning and overall coordination of foreign aid: the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA).

greater control to "provide strong support for opening new horizons in China's diplomacy" (Onnis 2019, 46; Wang 2017), and it began with the establishment of an unprecedented National Security Commission (NSC) in April 2014, chaired by Xi, which has the purpose of solving the coordination problems of both domestic and foreign policy decision-making. It continued in 2018 with the upgrading of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) (*Zhongyang waishi gongzuo lingdao xiaozu* 中央外事工作领导小组), headed by Xi, to Central Foreign Affairs Commission (*Waishi weiyuanhui* 外事委员会). It may be helpful to remember that the FALSG was set up in its prior form at the beginning of the 1980s with the precise goal of coordinating China's often disjointed foreign policy. Its general office, which was located inside the MFA, was reportedly often bypassed by other government agencies because it was seen as low-ranking and ineffective, and the group appeared to be incapable of coordinating China's foreign policy. The ministry had been troubled for many years by its inability to conduct its affairs coherently due to the presence of multiple actors seeking to influence foreign policy. With its new moves, the leadership sent a clear message that the Party alone controlled China's foreign affairs and that it would not tolerate actions that might compromise efforts to realise the China dream by means of the steps represented by the so-called 'two centenaries' (*liangge yibainian* 两个一百年), with special reference to the second, aimed at making the country a 'strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious, and modern socialist country' by 2049, the centenary of the PRC. Paradoxically, a process that had been initiated to strengthen the foreign policy decision-making process, and especially the ministry in charge of it, ended up by marginalising the MFA even further. In fact, as summit diplomacy has become more and more frequent, senior leaders (Xi *in primis*) have themselves become foreign ministries (Zhang 2016, 454), thus contributing to the diminishment of diplomats (Sun 2016).

4 Conclusions

The Chinese foreign policy decision-making system has a contradictory dual nature: it is excessively centralised and vertically hierarchical on the one hand, and pluralistic and chaotic on the other. It is in this second aspect that, according to some authors (Jakobson 2013; Jakobson, Manuel 2016), lies the heart of the problems with the PRC's foreign policy decision-making, which might be termed 'fragmented authoritarianism'. According to this model, authority is divided and fragmented just one level below the top of the Chinese political system, and because of this fragmentation, actors in the decision-making process are encouraged to seek a consensus to reach a conclusion,

which requires them to engage in long and sometimes strenuous bargaining (Lieberthal, Lampton 1995, 8).[11]

Two decisions, taken at the end of 2012 by the MPS and Hainan Provincial Government, respectively, offer a good example of the dysfunctions that this 'cacophony of voices' causes in Chinese decision-making. They also underline the damage that a single government entity can cause to China's international relations and reputation (Jakobson 2013, 14). On 26 November 2012, the MPS issued new passports with maps that included disputed islands and territories as Chinese territory without first consulting the MFA. This led to serious tensions between the two ministries. A few days later, without asking for central government approval, the Hainan Provincial Government announced that China's maritime law enforcement vessels would stop and search ships in the disputed areas of the SCS. These cases clearly show that despite the highly-centralised Chinese foreign policy structure, with its traditional decision makers (the Politburo and its Standing Committee) still representing the pinnacle of political power, non-traditional actors represent a reality that cannot be neglected, since they struggle to make their voice heard, and their actions can sometimes provoke diplomatic incidents that can be detrimental to the country's interests.

In conclusion, in response to those scholars who emphasise the new personalism embedded in Xi Jinping's posture and the return of personalistic rule in Chinese policy-making (Shirk 2018), there are others who point out that he simply cannot lead as Mao and Deng did because of the dramatic changes that have taken place in China's foreign relations (Zhang 2016, 452) and its foreign policy decision-making process.

11 In a recent publication on the role of interest groups in China's foreign policy, Xu Yanzhuo rejects the notion that there is any bargaining at all in the foreign policy decision-making, while recognising that "more actors have varying degrees of autonomy and capacity to intervene in the foreign policy process through policy briefing reports and implementation processes" (Xu 2022, 53).

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