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Moreover, while Xi has professed a stronger resolve to defend China’s “core interests,” he has also demonstrated the ability to pursue cautious and flexible diplomacy in a complex world. As a tough but pragmatic realist, Xi is strategically using diplomacy to redefine China’s relations with the US and rebuild its image among its neighbors.

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XI’S CHINA DREAM: NATIONALIST OR REALIST?  
On Nov. 29, 2012, less than two weeks after taking over the top position of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping and six other members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo visited “The Road Toward Renewal” exhibition at the National Museum of China. There, Xi outlined his idea of the “China Dream,” which involves “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”1

As the first and most significant political slogan of the new administration, the idea of the China Dream symbolizes Xi’s vision for China’s future and its place in the world.

During his speech, Xi emphasized the humiliations suffered by China since the 19th century due to its weakness and backwardness. He suggested that China is nearing the end of a period of continuous striving for rejuvenation that began with the Opium Wars. “We are now closer than ever to the goal of China’s national revival,” he said. “We are more confident and better equipped than ever to realize this goal.”2

This seemingly nationalist vision led to speculation among observers of China that the new administration’s foreign policies might demonstrate distinctive characteristics that reflect Xi’s own vision and worldview. In particular, there was conjecture that Xi might have a more nationalistic mind-set than his predecessors.3 His later comments on China’s uncompromising defense of its core interests and its championing of a strong military seemed to support this perspective.

However, there may be alternative interpretations of Xi’s China Dream and his goal of returning the country to the center of the world stage. Realism argues that a state’s relative power defines its foreign policy. As Fareed Zakaria puts it in his study of the rise of the United States as a world power, “capabilities shape intentions.”4 From this perspective, a state’s goals tend to expand with its material capabilities. A rising power inevitably aspires for more. Thus, Xi’s ambition to restore China to its former glory reflects its rapid ascendance in the international system, particularly off the back of its strong economic growth over more than three decades.

Recent international assessments all indicate that China’s economy is rising faster than expected.5 Until recently, the general opinion was that US dominance could continue until 2050.6 However, following the 2008 global financial crisis, China’s high-speed growth and the appreciation of the renminbi have led to a re-evaluation of predictions for the convergence of the economic power of China and the United States. Now, it is expected that China’s gross domestic product (GDP) could surpass that of the US sometime between 2017 and 2025, depending on whether the predictions are based on purchasing power parity (PPP) or the US dollar’s market exchange rate.

Therefore, Xi’s stated goal of a great revival is not based on nationalist fervor. Instead, it reflects the realistic ambition of a rising state that is about to claim its place at the top tier of the international power hierarchy. This realist interpretation of Xi’s intentions is significant, because it could lead to different predictions regarding his preferences, worldview and policies.

In contrast to a classical realist interpretation of Xi’s China Dream slogan, which links his bold vision for China to its rising power, the concept of offensive realism, which emphasizes the effects of the anarchic international structure, offers an alternative understanding of his goals and motives. According to John Mearsheimer, the anarchic nature of international relations forces states to try to maximize their power.7 In particular, states attempt to increase their power in relation to other states to achieve a position of greater security. Therefore, all great powers are revisionist, because they all attempt to change the balance of power in their favor, the ultimate goal being to become the most powerful country in the international system.

From this perspective, Xi’s goal of returning China to the top of the global power hierarchy could reflect an offensive realist motive in that one must have power to have security and that more power leads to more security. For example, in his China Dream speech, Xi specifically mentioned the Chinese adage that “backwardness invites aggression,” which has defined China’s understanding of its abuse by imperialist powers since the 19th century. This essentially offensive realist understanding of power and security still underlies thinking on international relations among China’s elites.

Looking from this angle, Xi’s China Dream slogan may show affinity with a book of the same title written by Liu Mingfu, a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) strategist. Liu’s book, published in 2010, promotes an unambiguously offensive realist agenda for China in world affairs by specifically calling for it to become the world’s most powerful country with the most powerful military, all for the purpose of protecting China’s national security. When Xi proposed his China Dream slogan, the BBC interviewed Liu, who claimed that China’s new leader shared his dream of making China the world’s dominant power.8

Such an offensive realist understanding of Xi’s vision for China implies that he is no different from the leaders of many other great powers, present and past, who have all aspired to attain a favorable spot for their countries in the international power hierarchy. Indeed, as American scholars have argued, the US itself pursued a grand strategy of hegemony during the unipolar era after the Cold War.9 They point out that the administrations of US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both articulated a national security strategy aimed at preventing the rise of a peer challenger. Both also pursued policies, such as missile defense and expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to maximize US power advantages over other great powers.

These origins of Xi’s China Dream slogan are critical to understanding his vision of China’s role in world affairs. Alternative interpretations lead to different expectations of China’s future goals and behavior. For instance, a nationalist interpretation could lead to less sanguine expectations. In this context, a nationalist leader consumed by China’s past humiliations and aided...
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Xi Jinping has also demonstrated two important realist characteristics: his emphasis on military power, and his tough position on external conflicts that involve China's core interests.

Soon after outlining his China Dream vision, Xi made a grand tour of southern China and used the occasion to highlight his other ideas for a rising China. On Dec. 8 and 10, 2012, Xi visited military units of the Guangzhou Military District and delivered an important message to the PLA. He said that while the basis of the China Dream is a great revival of the Chinese nation, for the PLA it is the dream for a powerful military.” As he emphasized, “To achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, we must steadfastly champion a unified goal of a rich country and powerful military.” Further, Xi stressed that a powerful military “must be able to fight and be able to win.”

Xi’s recognition of the equal importance of a rich country and a powerful military is an important modification of the Chinese grand strategy. Two decades ago, Deng Xiaoping advised China to focus on economic modernization as the pathway to national revival. His successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, maintained the same strategic focus. Although neither neglected the modernization of the Chinese military, both Jiang and Hu adhered to Deng’s tenets that prioritized economic power over military power. As a result, China’s rise followed a primarily liberal international strategy that emphasized economic modernization, technological changes and integration with the world market. In fact, Hu Jintao’s greatest theoretical legacy was his idea of “scientific development,” which emphasized sustainable economic progress. Deng’s emphasis on economic power reflected not only his appreciation of the importance of China’s economy to its rise, but also his understanding of the potential international backlash if military power was assigned equal importance in Beijing’s grand strategy. Deng was acutely aware of the diplomatic challenges facing a rising China, particularly if the international system was characterized by a unipolar order. 

Xi has now modified Deng’s strategic tenets by emphasizing the parity of the twin goals of a rich country and a powerful military. The China Dream and China’s return to the top of the international power hierarchy depends on both economic and military power. This reflects a true realist understanding of international relations, and it differs from the hitherto rather liberal international strategy that focused on economic modernization as the pathway for China’s rise.

Xi’s view represents a classic realist approach. Indeed, realists past and present have emphasized the importance of military power. In their conception, as long as the international system is anarchic, security remains the No. 1 priority for states. Only a powerful military can protect states from external threats to their security. Therefore, realists tend to see military power as a higher priority than economic power in the complex array of comprehensive national capabilities. According to offensive realists like Mearsheimer, military power defines power itself, while economic capabilities merely represent a state’s latent power. Although Xi does not prioritize the military over the economy, he has nonetheless modified Deng’s strategic tenets by assigning them equal importance.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Xi has abandoned China’s strategy of a peaceful rise. In many occasions Xi has re-stated China’s adherence to it. The truth is that Xi is a realist who has a more complex understanding of China’s rise than his predecessors did. Compared to Chinese leaders before him, Xi is more astutely aware of the uncertainties and instabilities of a realist world. After all, Xi assumed leadership amid heightened tensions between China and Japan that almost brought them to the brink of war. Neither Jiang Zemin nor Hu Jintao faced the same scenario. Therefore, Xi’s emphasis on military power should not be detached from the context of his political succession.

Moreover, Xi’s vision of China as a world-class economic and military power is no different from the standard viewpoint of American leaders, who, without exception, emphasize the importance of maintaining US military dominance. Indeed, according to the US National Intelligence Council’s future power assessment, although the US must learn to live in an increasingly multipolar world, it must strive to maintain its military superiority. Democrats and Republicans alike share that goal. This obsession with military supremacy explains why the US spends nearly 5 percent of its GDP on the military. This far exceeds the military expenditures of other great powers, including China, which is estimated to spend around 2 percent of its GDP on defense.

Therefore, Xi’s view on the role of the military in safeguarding China’s security is no different from that of American leaders. They all exhibit a realist’s concern for security in an anarchic international system. Nonetheless, a militarily powerful China could try to resolve disputes with other countries in its own favor. So while Xi’s emphasis on military power reflects normal state behavior in an anarchic international system, it could trigger concerns among other countries — and already has in the case of maritime disputes with Japan and several Southeast Asian nations.

In addition to his appreciation of the role of military power in China’s “great rejuvenation,” Xi has professed a stronger resolve to defend China’s core national interests. At a Politburo meeting on Jan. 28, 2013, Xi emphasized that while China will adhere to the path of a peaceful rise, “it will not sacrifice its rightful and legitimate interests. No other countries should expect us to trade away our core interests. Nor should they expect us to swallow the bitter results of injuries to our sovereignty, security, and development.” This statement by Xi has been interpreted as the toughest to date regarding China’s core interests. According to some analyses, Xi’s comments indicate that China is willing to go to war to safeguard its legitimate interests, even though doing so would inevitably have negative consequences for its economic prosperity.

Indeed, by the time of this statement, Xi had already demonstrated his credentials as a tough defender of China’s core interests. Before assuming leadership at the end of 2012, Xi had been responsible for orchestrating China’s response to Japan’s planned nationalization of the disputed Diaoyu Islands, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan. According to reports, Xi co-ordinated different elements of China’s foreign policy and security establishments to deliver a forceful counter-attack in case Tokyo disregarded Beijing’s warning and tried to complete the nationalization process. When the Japanese government nationalized the islands in September, ships from China’s maritime security agencies immediately entered the Japanese-controlled waters around the islands. Since then, China has maintained a regular presence in the area, which is supposed to

by its rapidly expanding power could favor more aggressive scenarios that threaten the security of other countries. In contrast, a realist understanding could lead to more benign expectations of China. While it seems logical to conclude that China’s rising power indicates expanding goals and ambitions, good realists are also capable of implementing cautious and pragmatic policies. In fact, as discussed later, recent Chinese foreign policies in various contexts indicate that Xi is a pragmatic realist.

A HARDER REALIST

Xi Jinping has also demonstrated two important realist characteristics: his emphasis on military power, and his tough position on external conflicts that involve China’s core interests. Soon after outlining his China Dream vision, Xi made a grand tour of southern China and used the occasion to highlight his other ideas for a rising China. On Dec. 8 and 10, 2012, Xi visited military units of the Guangzhou Military District and delivered an important message to the PLA. He said that while the basis of the China Dream is a great revival of the Chinese nation, for the PLA it is the dream for a powerful military.” As he emphasized, “To achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, we must steadfastly champion a unified goal of a rich country and powerful military.” Further, Xi stressed that a powerful military “must be able to fight and be able to win.”

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be under Japan’s administrative control. Moreover, China has adopted a tough position in negotiations over the islands. Beijing has insisted that Tokyo must first acknowledge the disputed status of the islands before the two countries can resume meetings at a summit level. Although the government of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has repeatedly called for such talks, Xi has not budged.

To many Chinese, China’s response was timely, appropriate and forceful. They believe that Beijing has fundamentally undermined the old status quo, represented by Japan’s de facto administrative control over the islands, and thereby achieved a major victory in the territorial dispute. While Xi demonstrated his “toughness” in defending China’s core interests, he has also shown himself to be an adroit diplomat who can pursue pragmatic foreign policies in multiple dimensions. This is reflected in China’s policy toward the US and in its relations with neighboring countries. While the US pivot toward Asia has been widely criticized for potentially adding to the strategic mistrust between the US and China and intensifying their security rivalries in the Asia-Pacific region, China’s actual response has been rather different. Instead of forceful counterattacks on the diplomatic and security fronts, China has tried to forge a closer relationship with the US through a “new type of great power relations.”

This unexpected Chinese response to US strategic rebalancing shows Xi’s flexibility as a realist. It has been widely reported that Xi has a strong personal interest in this new concept in US-China relations, which seeks to establish a special relationship between the two great powers that emphasizes co-operation and shuns strategic rivalry. According to some Chinese analysts, China has opted for a soft response to the US pivot to deflect and diffuse the effects of great-power rivalry.

China has launched intensive efforts to sell this new concept to the US. The June 2013 summit in California provided one such opportunity. During his meeting with the media, Xi used a prepared question from a Chinese reporter to elaborate at length on China’s vision for this new type of great power relationship. He stressed China’s sincerity in not wanting to challenge US primacy in the Asia-Pacific region and outlined the expected benefits of working together as a team.

There are different interpretations of why Xi has invested so much diplomatic capital in this concept. One view is that China used a soft response to the pivot to deflect and diffuse the blunt force of US strategic rebalancing. If this was the purpose, then Xi might have succeeded. Compared with 2011 and 2012, when the pivot was promoted with fanfare, today Washington has assumed a milder tone. The administration of US President Barack Obama, from the president to his chief foreign policy and defense officials, has dampened its earlier rhetoric and reemphasized co-operation with China. The June 2013 summit was an example of this change in tone. Another possible explanation, propounded by many US foreign policy experts, is that Xi’s ambition for China’s return to the top of the international system has motivated him to seek diplomatic equality with the US. Under this interpretation, a new type of great-power relationship that emphasizes mutual respect for core interests and power-sharing in a new world order will establish the perception that China and the US now belong to the same tier of great powers. Indeed, China has confined this new concept to Sino-US bilateral relations. This differentiation between China’s relations with the US and its relations with other major powers may reveal Xi’s suspected goal of elevating China’s international status to new heights through a de facto G-2 framework.

Regardless of Xi’s motives, he has proved to be a leader who can pragmatically adapt his realist tendencies to the real world, where US primacy still exists in various aspects of international relations. While Washington is unlikely formally to embrace this “new type of great-power relations,” Xi has succeeded in rolling back the harsher effects of the pivot by turning it in a milder and gentler direction.

The other area in which Xi has shown himself to be a flexible and pragmatic realist involves China’s position on the disputes in the South China Sea. In the spring and summer of 2012, there was a serious escalation when China and the Philippines faced off at the Scarborough
Shoals. At certain points, Beijing even hinted at the possibility of using force. In the end, China used its superior civilian maritime forces to gain control of the disputed area. However, since the second half of 2013, Xi’s China has shown greater willingness to reengage Southeast Asia with the aim of rebuilding its image there. Premier Li Keqiang and foreign minister Wang Yi have made multiple visits to the region to dispense economic aid and to articulate a more conciliatory message regarding the conflicts in the South China Sea. Xi himself visited Malaysia and Indonesia in October 2013. During his speech to the Indonesian parliament, Xi outlined his vision for “a community of common destiny” that promotes cooperation and shared interests among East Asian countries.

An important Chinese signal has been its willingness to pursue negotiations over a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.21 Although China joined the ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, not much progress has been made in implementing a legally binding Code of Conduct. Part of the reason has been China’s lack of interest in so-called multilateral solutions to the South China Sea disputes. Beijing has insisted in the past that countries with disputes should resolve them bilaterally.

Therefore, in the context of US strategic rebalancing, Xi’s administration has shown greater interest in smoothing China’s relations with ASEAN. The recent “diplomatic charm” offensive is an outcome of China’s renewed focus on so-called neighborhood relations, which were neglected during 2012 due to the US pivot and the conflict with Japan in the East China Sea.22 China’s re-engagement with ASEAN and its new flexibility on the South China Sea disputes indicate that while Xi is a tough defender of China’s national interests, he can be pragmatic on the operational level and in specific contexts. Xi has proved himself to be a diplomat who can survey the strategic landscape and make necessary and pragmatic adjustments in China’s foreign policy. Whereas Xi stands firm in certain contexts, such as the territorial dispute with Japan, he is capable of using diplomacy to resolve China’s foreign policy challenges on other fronts.

The recent oil rig spat between China and Vietnam near the Paracels Islands should not indicate that Beijing has abandoned its recent engagement strategies toward the ASEAN. The fact is that China has long claimed sovereignty over the Paracels and its 1974 naval victory over South Vietnam consolidated its control over this group of islands. China has consistently argued that it has the legitimate right to explore oil in its own territorial waters surrounding the Paracels Islands. Nonetheless, this unexpected spat with Vietnam has caused some neighboring countries to doubt China’s sincerity over peaceful resolution to South China Sea conflicts.

LEADING CHINA TO CENTER STAGE

Xi’s term will end in 2022. By then, it is highly likely that China will have surpassed the US as the largest economy in the world. In this sense, Xi will lead China into a new era of world politics, with the country commanding the center stage of international relations.

As a realist motivated by the China Dream, Xi is expected to seek a greater voice and a larger role for China in world affairs, especially as its power further increases. In this regard, there will be uncertainties about China’s intentions and behavior. As China ascends in the global power hierarchy, other countries will worry because, after all, realists base their foreign policy goals on power. Xi’s current pragmatism in foreign policy may well be the result of China’s current disadvantage in relative power versus that of the US.

Toward the end of his tenure, when China is expected to have further narrowed the power gap with the US, Xi’s foreign policy may be different. By that time, China may have already established primacy on the western side of the Pacific. What will the China Dream be then? Will China aspire for regional hegemony? These questions are difficult to answer now, but it is possible that the China of the future will act differently from the China of today. As realists say, great powers always act like great powers. However, China’s future power is likely to be balanced by the US. While China will certainly become the largest economic and financial power in the world, the US may still maintain an advantage in military power.

This new bipolar order may help restrain China’s ambition and limit the scope of the China Dream.

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