October 20, Session 4 The Evolving Structure of Chinese Foreign Policy-Making

In *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform,* Lampton identifies four dominant tendencies that have emerged in Chinese foreign policy making since Deng initiated China's Opening Up reforms (改革开放) in 1978: professionalisation, corporate pluralisation, decentralisation and globalisation. The level of sea-change in generating these motions is perhaps understated by Lu Ning whose position creates sensitivities however Nathan and Scobell are more direct in documenting the concentration of foreign policy making powers under Mao: 'during the Cultural Revolution, Mao disbanded the few foreign policy institutes China had, called home all but one of its ambassadors, and sent most of the foreign policy establishment to the countryside to be reeducated by the peasants […] Mao's foreign policy apparatus was rudimentary, often solely implemented through Zhou Enlai' (Nathan and Scobell, 2012, 85). These four emergent tendencies under Deng have responded to the growing complexity in coordinating Chinese foreign and security policy (the 'coordination problem') in China's going out' (走出去战略) [1] and the spotlight that increasing economic interaction placed on China's policy transmission apparatus at home.

As China normalised relations and began a process of deep economic integration with the United States; re-established formal diplomatic relations in its near neighbourhood; extended the nation's interests and reach to areas where China had not historically had much prior interaction such as the Middle East, Africa and the Arctic; and engaged with the UN, WTO and other multilateral forums on systemic risks and events in world trade (terrorism, financial crises, border disputes, wars) the resurgence of the great tide (da Chao Xinqi 大潮新起) of opening up and going out under Deng drove China's foreign policy making apparatus toward greater institutional sophistication and inter-functionality between the key information collecting, policy thinking, making, and implementing organs of the state. In this capacity, Miller's examination of the renewed dynamism and relative manoeuvrability Deng gave to the ad-hoc leading small groups (领导小组) to advise but also (in contrast to Mao) *implement* policy decisions made by the Politburo and supervised by the Secretariat is a key dimension to discerning the evolving structure of Chinese foreign policy making.

For Grunberg, the leading small groups are the CCP's *nerve centre*, supplying the Politburo with options, establishing priorities, evaluating costs and gains, and then enforcing implementation within an increasingly fractious organisational structure and society below (Grunberg, 2019). What is interesting to note from Miller is how the PRC media very rarely publicise details of the leading groups, which in contrast to the relative openness of U.S. policy-making continues to generate a dynamic ripe for misperception and distrust. It is notable that Lampton's edited book is dedicated to Doak A. Barnett who, as Lieberthal and Lampton note in *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China (1992)* from his post in Hong Kong was 'the only foreign scholar who has been able to interview an active member of the Politburo concerning bureaucratic dimensions of the decision-making process in A. Doak Barnett, *The Making of Foreign Policy In China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).[2] Lu Ning, a former assistant of a vice-foreign minister in Beijing and Alex He, a former professor at the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) now based at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Canada both attest to the new tendency of professionalisation and globalisation in China's foreign policy-making structure in what Nathan and Scobell call an 'outer ring' of foreign policy advisers outside China but advising Beijing on each move within its principal trading partner economies.

In decentralisation, Lampton draws on the international dynamism of the Chinese provinces and major cities in global production networks as a key tendency drawing local bodies closer to foreign policy decisions particularly in the economic, cultural and border spheres. China today is the principal trading partner of every country of economic consequence in the world, which has drawn Chinese foreign policy closer to international bodies such as the UN, WTO and on issues such as 'arms control', 'jihadism' and 'climate change' which are now an integral part of China's diplomatic vocabulary. In corporate or institutional pluralisation, Lampton notes, Chinese foreign policy making has been marked by 'a greater public awareness of conflicts of interest between the main bureaucracies participating in the formulation of foreign and security policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Central Military Board, etc.) as well as by a greater influence of what passes for public opinion in this area.' I found Lu Ning's analysis of how the Ministry of Commerce has emerged at the expense of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Deng powerfully contrasted with Wuthnow's analysis of how Xi has re-centralised the foreign policy making structure due to what Lampton describes as a disaffection 'with the relatively independent internal security apparatus that Zhou Yongkang had consolidated and with a Jiang and Hu-inherited professional foreign policy bureaucracy and its associated public intellectuals that is too cautious, too co-opted by traditional arrangements and not intellectually innovative' (Lampton, 2015).

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[1] Some of the coordination problems outside analysts have observed include: in the 1980s, military entities and arms sales firms sold missiles and other dangerous technologies to countries (Saudi Arabia and Iran) in circumstances that agitated the West and created problems for a PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs that appeared out of the loop; dozens of agencies with maritime assets operate in near- and distant-waters, extracting resources and making claims that can create conflicts within China and with foreigners that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or others have to clean up;10 China's Foreign Ministry and domestic development agencies such as the National Development and Reform Commission have not always been on the same page with respect to climate change policy; the military has sometimes conducted weapons tests and other operations (2007, 2010, 2012, 2013) that have created physical or diplomatic debris by taking actions about which the Foreign Ministry apparently had no prior knowledge; and, the military has not always told its civilian masters what those leaders needed to know at the outset of a crisis, making subsequent resolution more difficult (2001)

[2] Indeed in Decision-Making in Deng's China: Perspectives from Insiders, Hamrin et. al explore the reasons for the better picture of the formal processes in the Soviet Union are clear enough. Western access and contacts developed over a far longer period and continued even during episodes of tension and confrontation. Soviet official press and media sources have been far more extensive and revealing since at least the Khrushchev period. The Soviet emigre community included several people who once worked at relatively high levels of the Soviet system and who have since written and talked about their experiences. We have the memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev himself: there is no memoir of comparable detail available for any Chinese leader at that level, and the few that have appeared - such as Marshal Nie Rongzhen's - have been highly selective and overwhelmingly anecdotal. […] after the collapse of the USSR, it became possible for foreigners to gain access to those archives of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, the CPSU, and, for a time, even the KGB that survived the shredders.

Much was made in 2018 of Xi Jinping's move to upgrade four leading small groups, including the Leading Small Group (LSG) on Foreign Affairs, to Commissions. In *In Xi's China, the Center Takes Control of Foreign Affairs,* Legarda notes that while the precise difference between a LSG and a commission is unclear: 'for policymakers dealing with China, including in Europe, this may not be the worst outcome as it would eliminate conflicting messages. In the past China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was often undercut by "higher authorities." The streamlining now sends a clear message that the Party alone controls China's foreign affairs – and that it will not tolerate policies or actions that could jeopardise China's efforts to become a global power by 2049.' In this sense the third institutional tendency of decentralisation in Chinese foreign policy making has emerged against a newer centralising impulse under Xi Jinping's leadership, that 'in his acquisition of all major cross-system integrator roles [chairmanships of leading groups, particularly the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform and the Central Military Commission (CMC)] suggests Xi is trying to impose a degree of personal control over a pluralised society and ever-more complex bureaucracy.'[3] A strong litmus to Xi's sense of control loss might be found in the sentences given to his critics in Xu Zhangrun and Ren Zhiqiang. Indeed, to what extent foreign policy re-centralisation as a tendency can operate within an environment where economic globalisation has pushed and entrenched wealth outside the party frame, and given greater federalising impulses into China's central-local policy transmission and coordination space is a key open question thinkers like Wuthnow, Miller and Lampton trace.

This tendency of foreign policy re-centralisation is explored most pointedly by Wuthnow in Xi's 2013 push at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee for a major regrouping of the top CCP power structure toward a new "National Security Commission" (guojia anquan weiyuanhui; 国家安全委员会) in China. Wuthnow, writing in 2013, postured that the relationship between the new commission and the PLA was unclear, a point furthered by Nathan and Scobell, suggesting that the 'old structures of civilian control may no longer be robust enough to coordinate China's military actions with its diplomatic strategy at a time when the army's capabilities are expanding and its regional role is growing. In the trend of institutionalisation in the making of foreign policy in general, civilian control of the military lags behind.' In a more recent 2016 article, Wuthnow followed up on the NSC under Xi and its relative disappearance from internal and external media, suggesting that the most likely explanation is that elite or bureaucratic resistance has stymied the NSC's development. The military has historically been a notorious stove-piper, 'tightly holding onto intelligence about its capabilities and operations as a key source of institutional power. The military also has little incentive to cooperate with civilian ministries, whose leaders occupy relatively low-level positions in the party hierarchy. The military's top two uniformed officers sit on the Politburo, whereas the minister of foreign affairs is only one of the more than 200 members who make up the lower-level Central Committee. Another issue is the potential duplication of effort among the NSC, the CMC, and China's cabinet — the State Council — regarding crisis response' (Wuthnow, 2016). Secrecy in the NSC operates counter to a broader push of Xi's for cross-institutional dynamism in China's foreign-policy making through transparency.

To an extent, in the UK, a similar institutional tendency toward the recentralisation of the foreign policy structure has emerged under Johnson-Cummings: the Department for International Trade being merged under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is aimed at aligning economic aid with foreign policy goals and joins a broader long-term push to de-mobilise a perceived lumbering British civil and foreign policy structure toward a more streamlined U.S operation, a NASA style mission control centre in the Cabinet Office building has been proposed (Payne and Parker, 2020). In this light, similar pushback has been expressed though in an open press where the transmission space between bureaucratic and civilian disaffection is much more fluid. On the inverse of Xi's perception of an ineffective Chinese foreign-policy making structure, Trump's populist rhetoric to 'drain the swamp' operates by the logic that a deep clandestine network of military and intelligence agencies, entrenched at the centre of the U.S. federal system, drives foreign policies and forever wars in the Middle East. If Trump might be viewed as wresting control from a vested structure, at the same time there appears to be tightening cohesion between the economic and foreign policy of the U.S. system toward China and the Pacific which many argue would continue under Biden. An interesting question might be: to what extent Xi's de-civilianisation of Chinese foreign policy making and movement toward the PLA is driven by perceived changes in the U.S foreign policy-making structure?

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[3] Indeed, key questions have been raised recently of Xi's absence from the New Leading Small Group for Countering the Coronavirus Pandemic *(The CCP's New Leading Small Group for Countering the Coronavirus Epidemic—and the Mysterious Absence of Xi Jinping)* and of the fluctuating profile of Xi's National Security Council as indicators of bureaucratic pushback, and of Xi pressing an agenda that exceeds his span of effective control.

This question furthermore draws the bureaucratic analyses here of non-unitary interests in a complex state fabric closer to the the structural realist and new strategic bipolarity school of writers like Allison and Yan Xuetong. In a sense, the agglomerate of the two arrives in a constructivism that observes new tendencies in China's foreign policy making structure as emergent 'through internal actors - bureaucratic politics, factions and business activities - and external pressures.' Each of the authors here might extend their analyses further through constructivist[4] lenses that observe that while the external environment does constrain Chinese and U.S. foreign policy making structures, both can also transform these constraints by relating to them and acting upon them in new ways (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996: 41). China's foreign policy-making structure has evolved since the Opening Up era of reforms to a more complex international environment that Beijing is now seeking to shape the 'collective expectations', norms and rules of appropriate behaviour in. However, re-centralisation under Xi also creates new span of *effective control*, *coordination* and *policy transmission* problems that the foreign policy making structure must institutionally adapt toward against vested and entrenched positions.

I thought that Lu Ning's historical analysis, as well as Miller and Wuthnow's contributions could benefit in this capacity from exploring a historical institutionalist framework. Lu Ning brings to light an interesting episode of an institutional tendency in Deng's early exploration of political reform to separate the party from the state and its disbandment after Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the Politburo witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union under *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms and the economic advice of the West in the IMF and World Bank.. Yet each of the analyses here in focusing on a gradualist evolutionary frame perhaps underplay the role of critical junctures and radical breaks in the evolution of Chinese foreign-policy making. A historical institutionalist framework such as Karl Polanyi's great transformation that explores how timing, sequences, path dependence, small events, alternatives and critical junctures set in motion events and institutional evolutions that are hard to reverse once adopted might be utilised to understand Xi's re-centralisation tendency. I found greatest open sky in this sense with Nathan and Scobell's exploration of social learning, technical expertise and bureaucratic embedding in the elite Politburo decision-making cycle and would be interested to read more archival sources to understand the psychologies, priorities and perceptions in critical junctures and schisms within China's foreign policy making structure. In this sense I imagined a few questions that might be particularly relevant to understanding the future evolution of Chinese foreign-policy making:

Questions

To what extent might Scobell and Nathan's focus on social learning, technical expertise, and bureaucratic embedding shine a new perspective on the prominence of the Taiwan issue in Xi's foreign policy agenda?

Does a movement of China's foreign policy-making structure closer to the PLA risk creating confusing signals such as South China Sea militarism coexisting alongside the blue water, open sea, international commons trade agenda of the Belt and Road? Is Xi's foreign policy becoming more political and less economic than his predecessors?

How might a historical institutionalist lens focused on the notion of critical junctures inform an evolutionary perspective on the current and future shape of China's foreign policy-making structure?

Is COVID-19 a critical juncture in Chinese foreign policy-making? What new institutions must China's foreign policy-making structure create in the wake of the pandemic?

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[4] In a constructivist perspective, the behaviour of states is driven by rules of appropriate behaviour. 'Norms therefore constitute states/agents, providing them with understandings of their interests' (Checkel 1998: 326; 2005: 804). Accordingly, norms 'describe collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity' (Katzenstein 1996: 5).

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