

Original citation:

Breslin, Shaun. Securing China's core interests : the state of the debate in China. International Affairs, Volume 91 (Number 2). ISSN 0020-5850 (In Press)

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Publisher statement:

This is the accepted version of the following article: Breslin, Shaun. Securing China's core interests : the state of the debate in China. International Affairs, Volume 91 (Number 2). ISSN 0020-5850 (In Press).

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291468-2346>

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Title: Securing China's Core Interests: The State of the Debate in China

“We will stick to the road of peaceful development, but will never give up our legitimate rights and will never sacrifice our national **core interests**. No country should presume that we will engage in trade involving our **core interests** or that we will swallow the 'bitter fruit' of harming our sovereignty, security or development interests.”

– Xi Jinping, *excerpt from his talk at a group study session of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo*¹

Jinghan Zeng is Vice-Chancellor's 2020 Lecturer in the Department of Politics and Public Policy at De Montfort University and an Associate Fellow in the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation at the University of Warwick. He holds degrees from the University of Warwick (PhD, May 2012- April 2014) and the University of Pittsburgh (MA, 2009-2011). His research and teaching interests lie in the field of Comparative Politics, International Relations, Chinese Studies, and Social Science Research Methods, with more specific interests in the study of China's authoritarian system, elite politics of contemporary China, and Chinese foreign policy. His academic papers have appeared in *Contemporary Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Journal of Chinese Political Science*.

Jinghan.zeng@dmu.ac.uk

Yuefan Xiao is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on regime resilience of the Chinese Party-state and China's international relations. He recently completed his PhD on the politics of crisis management in China at the University of Warwick. He is currently working on a ERC funded project: ChinaCreative, for which he analyses how governmentality has been entangled with the possibility to critique in Chinese creative industries.

Y.Xiao@uva.nl

Shaun Breslin is Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick and Senior Scientist on the EU funded GR:EEN Project (Global Reordering: Evolution through European Networks) that focusses on the EU's role in a multipolar world. He is also Associate Fellow of the Chatham House Asia Programme and co-editor of *The Pacific Review*. His publications include five books and monographs, 14 edited collections (books, journal special issues and readers), 42 articles in refereed journals and 51 book chapters; primarily on the political economy of contemporary China with a side interest in comparative studies of regional integration processes.

Shaun.Breslin@warwick.ac.uk

¹ Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping: Genghao tongchou guonei guoji liangge daju, hangshi zou heping fazhan daolu de jichu (Xi Jinping: To Better Manage Domestic and International Situations and to Lay a Solid Foundation to the Path of Peaceful Development)," (2013), available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-01/29/c_114538253.htm accessed on 26 January 2015

Abstract: As China has grown stronger, some observers have identified an assertive turn in Chinese foreign policy. Evidence to support this argument includes the increasingly frequent evocation of China’s “core interests” – a set of interests that represents the non-negotiable bottom lines of Chinese foreign policy. When new concepts, ideas and political agendas are introduced in China, they are often not clearly defined with a shared understanding or definition; the process of populating the concept with real meaning often takes place incrementally. This, we argue, is what has happened with the notion of core interests. While there are some agreed bottom lines, what issues deserve to be defined (and thus protected) as core interests remains somewhat blurred and open to question. By using content analysis to study 108 Chinese articles, this article analyses Chinese academic discourse of China’s core interests. Our main finding is that “core interests” is a vague concept in the Chinese discourse despite its increasing use by the government to legitimize its diplomatic actions and claims. We argue that this vagueness not only makes it difficult to predict Chinese diplomatic behaviour on key issues, but also allows external observers a rich source of opinions to select from to help support pre-existing views on the nature of China as a global power.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy, Chinese security policy, Core interests, Assertiveness

Introduction

The extent to which a rising China’s core interests will (inevitably for some) clash with the interests of the existing dominant global power has been a topic of recurring interest for many years – perhaps since Aaron Friedberg identified the potential for growing rivalry in 1993.² Indeed, this debate has been featured in some detail in the pages of this journal.³ Primarily focussing on the China challenge to US interests in East Asia (rather than at the global scale), trying to identify when China might be able to achieve regional “primacy, supremacy, or hegemony” remains “the name of the international politics game in Asia”⁴ some twenty years on. While this interest in China’s rise did not exactly need to be given a renewed impetus, the question of whether we had moved into a new period of increased assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy in 2009 (or thereabouts) brought a new dimension to

² Aaron Friedberg ‘Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia’, *International Security* 18: 3, 1993-4, pp. 5-33.

³ Examples include Brantly Womack (2013), “Beyond win–win: rethinking China’s international relationships in an era of economic uncertainty”, *International Affairs*, 89 (4): 911–928; Ian Clark (2011), “China and the United States: a succession of hegemonies?”, *International Affairs*, 87 (1): 13–28; Rosemary Foot (2006), “Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging”, *International Affairs*, 82 (1): 77-94; Shaun Breslin (2013), “China and the global order: signalling threat or friendship?”, *International Affairs*, 89 (3): 615-634; and Amitai Etzioni (2011) “Is China a responsible stakeholder?”, *International Affairs*, 8 (3), 2011, 539-553.

⁴ Yuen Foong Khong (2013-14) “Primacy or World Order? The United States and China’s Rise—A Review Essay” *International Security*, Volume 38, Number 3, Winter 2013/2014, p. 154 of 153-175.

the debates.⁵ Here, disagreement has centred on first what it means or takes to be considered to be “assertive” and second, whether Chinese policy has fundamentally changed or not.

There is also a third dimension to the study of assertiveness; what is China being assertive about? China’s leaders are not shy in asserting that there are a set of “core interests” (hexin liyi) that are non-negotiable bottom lines of Chinese policy. In the words of Xi Jinping:

“We will stick to the road of peaceful development, but will never give up our legitimate rights and will never sacrifice our national core interests. No country should presume that we will engage in trade involving our core interests or that we will swallow the 'bitter fruit' of harming our sovereignty, security or development interests”.⁶

In a similar vein, the influential Chinese scholar Shi Yinhong has asserted that:

“China should never give in while defending its core interests. Only when it comes to non-core interests should it make some compromise in order to ease the pressure on other big powers”.⁷

So if compromise is not possible on core interests, it would make sense to identify what these interests are to better understand and even possibly to predict what China’s future international security strategies might entail.

Yet what these bottom-line core interests are that China might (or might not) be more forcefully asserting remains open to question. Michael Swaine’s analysis of the evolution of the use and definition of core interests with a focus on territorial issues gives us a firm base to start from.⁸ The 2011 White Paper on China’s Peaceful Development adds to this by defining core interests in general terms as including “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development”.⁹ Yet when it comes to specifics, then where the boundaries of core interests lie remains somewhat blurred and open to question. And this fuzziness might be deliberate and serve a good purpose. As a US Congress report on China’s core interests in the East China Sea pointed out, maintaining an ambiguous position gives Beijing flexibility in handling the dispute internationally, and prevents potential criticism that it is not acting forcefully enough domestically.¹⁰

⁵ See Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013). Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston (2013) “Debating China’s Assertiveness” *International Security*, Volume 38, Number 3, Winter 2013/2014, pp. 176-183

⁶ Xi Jinping, " Xi Jinping: Genghao tongchou guonei guoji liangge daju, hangshi zou heping fazhan daolu de jichu (Xi Jinping: To Better Manage Domestic and International Situations and to Lay a Solid Foundation to the Path of Peaceful Development)," (2013)

⁷ Yinhong Shi, "How to Boost China's Peaceful Rise," *China Daily* 2010. May 18

⁸ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part One: On 'Core Interests'," *China Leadership Monitor* 34 (2010).

⁹ State Council (2011) “White Paper on China's Peaceful Development”, (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council).

¹⁰ Caitlin Campbell, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu, and Craig Murray (2013), *China's "Core Interests" and the East China Sea*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, retrieved from <http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Core%20Interests%20and%20the%20East%20China%20Sea.pdf> on 11 November 2014

We do not pretend that this paper has the answer in terms of a clear, definitive and once and for all understanding of what China's core interests actually are. On the contrary, this paper will actually further muddy the water and make things less clear. It does this by turning the focus away from external perceptions of what China wants and how it might go about getting it to domestic debates within China about China's role and capabilities in world politics. Specifically, we focus on how Chinese academics and analysts are discussing (and defining) the nature of China's core interests, and how best to protect them. We do this by using a mixed quantitative/qualitative analysis to study 108 articles written by Chinese scholars (in Chinese) that deal with the concept of China's core interests. Nor do we pretend that the findings offer a radical new interpretation of Chinese thinking. Our more modest aim is simply to provide hard empirical evidence of what these (diverse) views actually are, and to open the Chinese debate up to a (largely) non-Chinese reading audience. In the process we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how new political ideas, concepts, approaches and agendas become established in China. When "external" ideas are adopted, it often takes time for them to become "sinicised" – to be given a specific meaning and understanding that works in (and arguably *for*) the Chinese political context. An example here might be the evolution of thinking over the nature of Chinese soft power (and how to utilise it). Domestically, when new concepts are put forward (often by China's leaders), they are not always clearly defined with the process of populating the concept with real meaning subsequently occurring incrementally. The concept of "The China Dream" might be an example here. And this, we argue, is also partially what is happening with the notion of core interests.

Our overarching conclusion is that despite its increasing use by the Chinese government to legitimize its diplomatic actions and claims, "China's core interests" remains a rather vague concept. With different voices from within China using different definitions, the boundaries between core and non-core interests are both moveable and porous. This, we argue, not only makes it difficult to predict Chinese diplomatic behaviour on key issues, but also allows external observers a rich source of opinions to select from to help support pre-existing views on the nature of China as a global power.

Researching China's core interests

Given that our intention in this paper is to uncover different thinking on (and definitions of) core interests, this suggests a prior understanding that there is a considerable degree of pluralism in Chinese thinking. This is not to say that each different opinion carries the same political weight – clearly what China's top leaders say and do has more significance than a short article in a relatively niche academic journal. And as we shall show, as in the case of core interests, it is the promotion of an idea by a political leader that can often act as the starting point for subsequent academic discussion. Nevertheless, we think it is important to go beyond a purely leader-centric focus for three reasons.

First, as the International Crisis Group has shown in relation to the South China Sea, a lack of coordination among different agencies can result in competing and at times conflicting security policy goals and actions.¹¹ Second, different voices of China can and do result in external responses that in turn impact on Chinese discourse and policy. Indeed, one of our key findings here is a concern amongst intellectuals that different messages emanating from within China are “misleading” international observers about the nature of Chinese claims and objectives. For example, an analyst from the Central Party School (CPS) has complained that some hard line, hawkish nationalist viewpoints “kidnap national interests”¹² by presenting minority views in ways as if they were the mainstream and reflecting China’s grand strategy. Here there are echoes of the Chinese debate over the creation of a “China Threat Thesis” in the 1990s – the idea that some foreign forces are looking for whatever evidence possible to show that China is a threat to the global order and to mobilise alliances to try and prevent (or at least condition) China’s rise.

This fragmentation and pluralism in part results from the opportunities that new political agendas provide for domestic actors. As Wang Yizhou points out, there is an incentive for agencies to define their own interests as being “core” in the hope that it will lead to more resources and power. For example, the “grain for green” project has been promoted as a national core interest by those associated with the forestry sector.¹³ While in this example there are no negative consequences for China’s national image and foreign policy, there is a consensus of sorts on the need for better coordination domestically in order to present a common face internationally.

Third, quite simply, we believe that there is real plurality in Chinese debates. To be sure, it is constrained plurality – there are places that Chinese analysts do not want to go and some policy “truths” that cannot be challenged. But this still leaves considerable space for discussion, debate and disagreement, which is reflected both in this study and previous similar projects undertaken on Chinese debates on the nature of regime legitimacy. Moreover, there is not just a supply of different opinions but a demand for them too. Here we have direct evidence as soon after a previous article on legitimacy was published¹⁴, a central CCP body asked for a summary report of it for internal use.¹⁵

Research Methods: quantitative content analysis + interviews

This study builds on previous uses of content analysis to discern Chinese academic discourses.¹⁶ Having first identified 108 Chinese academic articles from the China Academic

¹¹ International Crisis Group. (2012). *Stirring up the South China Sea (I). Asia Report No. 223*. Beijing; Brussels.

¹² Jianfei Liu, "Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi (Reflections on China's Diplomacy in Recent Years)," *Xueshu zhengming (Academic Contention)* 4 (2012):44

¹³ Diyu Zhang, "zhongguo 'hexinliy' zhi bian (the Debate on China's Core Interests)," *shijie zhishi (World Affairs)* 19 (2011):20

¹⁴ Jinghan Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: Bridging the Wide Gulf between Western and Chinese Scholarship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (2014)

¹⁵ Jinghan Zeng, Political Legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (in Chinese), government report for the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau of the CCP (2014).

¹⁶ e.g. Jinghan Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: Bridging the Wide Gulf between Western and Chinese Scholarship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (2014); Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, "The Debate on Party Legitimacy in China: A Mixed

Journals Full-text Database concerning China's core interests published between 2008 and 2013,¹⁷ we then designed a coding manual based on a preliminary reading of a representative sample. After piloting an early version of the coding scheme, two coders each read all 108 articles in order to eliminate sample bias of our inter-coding reliability assessment. Our inter-coding reliability (the level of agreement between the two coders) reached over 92%. We start from an assumption that coding can only give an indication of key themes and does not explain everything on its own. As such, this study was supported by interviews with some of the more influential authors that the coding results identified.¹⁸

Understanding China and its Foreign Policies

We noted in the introduction the widespread idea in western commentaries that China seems to have become increasingly assertive with the growth of its national strength. Within China, it is argued that this view is misguided, and that anything that China says and does that does not conform to the status quo is immediately taken as a sign of a new activism. This creates an inherent "bias" in interpreting China; "as long as China expresses its own independent views or hold different views from America, it will be considered as assertive".¹⁹ It is also argued that

"some countries usually categorize China as a weak developing country when discussing China's rights and interests but consider China as a developed major power when discussing about China's responsibility. This asymmetrical treatment reflects their selfishness and contradictions."²⁰

We find that 20.37% articles argue that foreign countries/the outside world has been 'discrediting' China or its foreign policies. For example, the former Chinese ambassador to Germany Mei Zhaorong argues that the EU has been using Taiwan and "East Turkistan" to "attack and slander China".²¹

Of course, the question that follows is why? 17.59% of articles argue that the outside world 'misunderstands' China. But this misunderstanding is not seen as being accidental; rather it is driven by interests. As one CASS researcher elaborates:

Quantitative/Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 59 (2009); Amy King, "Where Does Japan Fit in China's "New Type of Great Power Relations"?", *The Asan Forum* 2, no. 2 (2014); Biwu Zhang, "Chinese Perceptions of Us Return to Southeast Asia and the Prospect of China's Peaceful Rise," *Journal of Contemporary China* published online, no. DOI:10.1080/10670564.2014.918419 (2014); *Chinese Perceptions of the U.S.: An Exploration of China's Foreign Policy Motivations* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012); Tianbiao Zhu and Margaret Pearson, "Globalization and the Role of the State: Reflections on Chinese International and Comparative Political Economy Scholarship," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 6 (2013); Zhongying Pang and Hongying Wang, "Debating International Institutions and Global Governance: The Missing Chinese Ipe Contributionpang," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 6 (2013).

¹⁷ With core interests in the title or key words. Articles which studied the core interests of certain sectors or other countries (other than the national core interests of China) were filtered out.

¹⁸ All data including our coding manual, codebook, online-appendix and other materials are available at our research page <https://sites.google.com/site/zengjinghan/data>

¹⁹ Fan Wang and Shengli Ling, "zhongguo de waijiao zhengce bian qiangying le ma? - ruhe lijie zhongguo de xin waijiao(Did China's Foreign Policy Become More Assertive? - How to Understand China's New Diplomacy)," *dangdai shijie (Contemporary World)* (2013):23

²⁰ *Ibid.*:23

²¹ Mei, "Dui zhongguo guanxi de zai renshi (a Further Understanding of China-Europe Relations).":20

“a fundamental reason why some foreigners argue that China’s diplomacy become more ‘assertive’ is that this kind of argument fits their interests. They attempted to use this argument to divert attention”.²²

Another article argues that “this ‘assertiveness’ view is a revised version of the ‘China Threat Theory’ ... and a part of American strategy to maintain its hegemony at a time when its power might otherwise be in decline, and its natural allies turning away from the US towards multipolarity. Thus, these interests seek to “discredit and distort western public opinion about developing countries such as China”.²³ This article concluded that the international community needs to “use a more peaceful state of mind to treat an increasingly powerful China.” Crucially here, there is a key shift from the earlier debates over the China Threat Theory. Previously, the emphasis was on what China should do to try and assuage concerns in others and convince them of China’s responsibility and its commitment to peace and stability. And as we will discuss in more detail shortly, this argument retains considerable purchase today. But importantly it is not just China that is now seen as needing to change to fit with the realities of the global order. The global order needs to change too – or more correctly, key actors in the global order need to change – to reflect the realities of a global order that contains an increasingly powerful China. China is doing what it can to live with the world, and now “the rest of the world should learn how to better live with China”.²⁴

As already noted, relations with the US loom large, and just over a quarter of the articles (25.92%) argue that the US has been “containing” China. Many believe that the US manipulates key territorial integrity issues – Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang – as part of a broader strategy of containing China or even of splitting it. Almost all of these papers see the US strategy of (re)pivoting towards Asia as having an anti-China agenda at its core. A smaller set of scholars also point to Japan as a mean to the end of Chinese containment. Nonetheless, a few articles hold different views.²⁵ But once more, we see a diverse set of opinions and arguments. While the anti-US sentiment is the dominant one in the literature, there are also voices that suggest that the US has been using “engagement” instead of “containment”.²⁶ Moreover, rather than seeing the US as an obstacle to China’s rise, China should instead “should use the US to boost its rise”.²⁷ Others argue more pragmatically that the US is simply not capable of containing China because it is impossible to isolate China economically in today’s globalised world and to persuade other countries to join together to counter China’s rise.²⁸

²² Fangying Zhou, "zhongguo waijiao ruan yu ying de biao zhun shi shenme (What Standards of China's Diplomacy Are Soft and Hard?)," *renmin luntan (People's Forum)* 4 (2013):56

²³ Wang and Ling, "zhongguo de waijiao zhengce bian qiangying le ma? - ruhe lijie zhongguo de xin waijiao (Did China's Foreign Policy Become More Assertive? - How to Understand China's New Diplomacy).":24

²⁴ *Ibid.*:26

²⁵ e.g. Zeshi Li, "hou jinrong weiji shidai zhongmei zhanlv huxin tantao (Discussion on Sino-US Strategic Mutual Trust in the Era of Post-Financial Crisis)," *Tequ jingji (Special Zone Economy)* December (2011); Dingli Shen, "xin zhongguo 60nian: guoji diwei de bianhua (60 Years of New China: Changes in International Status)," *tansuo yu zhengming (Exploration and Free Views)* (2009); Haidong Li, "zhongmei guanxi 30 nian: tedian yu qushi (30 Years of Sino-US Relations: Characteristics and Trends)," *dangdai shijie (Contemporary World)* 1 (2009); Liu, "guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi (Reflections on China's Diplomacy in Recent Years)."

²⁶ Li, "zhongmei guanxi 30 nian: tedian yu qushi (30 Years of Sino-US Relations: Characteristics and Trends).":30

²⁷ Zeshi Li, "hou jinrong weiji shidai zhongmei zhanlv huxin tantao (Discussion on Sino-US Strategic Mutual Trust in the Era of Post-Financial Crisis).":104

²⁸ e.g. Liu, "Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi (Reflections on China's Diplomacy in Recent Years).":43

We should note, though, that it is not just external governments that are seen to be at fault, and the blame for misunderstanding Chinese intentions does not all lie with external perceptions. Public opinion and nationalism within China is seen as one (but only one) driver of China's foreign policy, and this domestic sentiment helps influence external perceptions of China. Somewhat ironically, the problem (as seen from China) is not that China is being assertive, but rather that it isn't being assertive enough. In the debate, 13.8% articles argue that Chinese society expects the government to take a tougher and less compromising line on foreign policy. For example, one article argues that

“some Chinese people considered the current Chinese diplomacy too weak. A primary reason is that the Chinese government lacks courage and determination to use military power when dealing with territorial disputes in recent years – unlike those tough foreign policies pursued before reform and opening up when China did not hesitate to take military actions”.²⁹

This kind of public opinions can be partly attributed the CCP's ruling strategy. In the past decades, the CCP has been using popular propaganda to disseminate the discourse of national rejuvenation in order to gain popular support.³⁰ It is the party and only the party that can defend China's core interests in a hostile international environment. However, a negative consequence of this strategy is that it contributes to the rise of Chinese nationalism. One result has been a tendency (in some at least) to take China's status as a global power – and increasingly as the number two global power – for granted. They thus have high expectations of what China *can* and *should* do in international affairs – expectations that some of China's international relations community argue do not mesh with the reality of the distribution of power in global order (and China's place in it). As a professor of Beijing University argued,

“in China, diplomacy is out of synch with domestic propaganda. China's diplomacy is not only incompatible with domestic propaganda, but is also kidnapped by the latter. In the end, when facing various complicated foreign affairs, domestic public opinion is seriously out of line with the reality of diplomacy”.³¹

The resulting suggestion in the debate is that the Chinese government needs to control the negative impacts of nationalism on diplomacy.³² For example, one article argues that “China should prevent nationalist sentiment or certain historical understandings from challenging the rational national security strategy”.³³ This refers to the way that “patriotic education” by the state has helped shape a nationalism that is strongly influenced by and rooted in “the Century

²⁹ Yunxiang Liang, "wajiao ruanying yulun fancha de shengceng jiexi (a Depth Analysis on Public Opinions on Diplomacy)," *renmin luntan (People's Forum)* 4 (2013):59

³⁰ Jinghan Zeng, *The Survival of the Chinese Communist Party: Evaluating Ideology, Legitimacy, and Party Cohesion*. (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015 forthcoming)

³¹ Feng Zhu, "weihu hexinliyi jidai wajiao da zhanlv " (to Protect China's Core Interests Needs Grand Strategy)," *Renming luntan (People's Forum)* S1 (2012):31

³² e.g. Xi Xiao, "Dongbeiya anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlv tiaozheng (on the Trend of Security in Northeast Asia and Adjustment of China's Strategies)," *jiaoxue yu yanjiu (Teaching and Research)* 7 (2011):79; Xuedong Yang, "zhong mei pingdeng guanxi de gengduo xinyi (More New Ideas in the Equal Sino-US Relations)," *renmin luntan (People's Forum)* 274 (2009):34

³³ Xiao, "dongbeiya anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlv tiaozheng (on the Trend of Security in Northeast Asia and Adjustment of China's Strategies).":79

of Humiliation".³⁴ Dominant historical narratives point to the role that foreign intervention and Western and Japanese imperialism played in weakening China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³⁵ This weak China was unable to defend its core interests and defend its territorial integrity in the face of foreign determination to subordinate and subjugate China. Only with the rise of the CCP was the tide turned and China's territorial integrity slowly restored – though not yet wholly so. It is this story, so the argument goes, that is at the root of some of the demand for a more assertive China, which thus requires a shift to cultivate “healthy historical views” built on a “great power mentality” rather than a victim discourse.³⁶ This would mean that negotiation and compromise is not automatically seen as negative and weak, and allow some leeway for diplomacy.

There is also a conflicting school that sees nationalism has having positive consequences for international affairs. For example, a Japan expert based at CASS argues that “China should gradually get used to negotiate the issues of Diaoyu Islands with Japan in public environments – i.e. publish detailed meeting minutes after every negotiation. In this way, China's foreign policy toward Japan will certainly win more and more public understanding and support. Only under public scrutiny and pay attentions to the changing public opinions can this kind of negotiation succeed. This is what ‘people's diplomacy’ should do”.³⁷

The Authors

An analysis of the home institution of the authors reveals the significance of state-affiliated think tanks in Chinese academic discourse. University academics account for less than half of the total authors (41.66%) with a third coming from think tanks - including 14.8% from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and 5.55% from the Central and Shanghai Party Schools. Just over five percent of papers were written by government officials and former diplomats, including three frequently cited and prominent commentators on China's international relations; Ma Zhengang (former Chinese ambassador to the UK), Mei Zhaorong (former ambassador to Germany), and Shen Guofang (the former Assistant Foreign Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative of China to the UN). While previous work on legitimacy revealed a nationwide spread of authors³⁸, the overwhelming majority in this study were located in Beijing (56.48%). While this may partly simply reflect the location of China's major think tanks and international relations focussed universities, it might also reflect the focus on local governments and local governance in legitimacy discourses in contrast to a more Beijing-centric international relations debate.

³⁴ Yinan He, "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict," *Journal of Contemporary China* 50, no. 16 (2007).

³⁵ Though not ignoring the role that was also played by oppressive, corrupt and ideologically bankrupt domestic leaders.

³⁶ Wang, "zhanlve huanjing de bianqian yu guojia liyi de jieding - zhongguo guoji jiaose de siwei gexin (Changes in Strategic Environment and Definition of National Interests - Innovative Thinking of China's Role in International Affairs).":74

³⁷ Lifeng Jiang, "diaoyudao wenti yu zhongri guanxi (Diaoyu Islands and Sino-Japanese Relations)," *riben xuekan (Japanese Studies)* 5 (2012):14

³⁸ Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: Bridging the Wide Gulf between Western and Chinese Scholarship."

Who informs the debate?

In a previous study on the nature of regime legitimacy in China (and challenges to it) one striking result was the extent to which the debate was informed by the writings of Western political scientists and philosophers. Here, the top ten cited authors were *all* western writers; Max Weber (cited in 49% of papers), Jurgen Habermas (40%), Samuel Huntington (39%), Seymour Lipset (39%), Karl Marx (33%), Gabriel Almond (33%), Rousseau (28%), David Easton (24%), Jeen-Marc Coicaud (23%), and Aristotle (19%).³⁹ We were told by Chinese scholars that the influence of Western scholars remains dominant in the Chinese academic writings of politics.⁴⁰ Furthermore, due to the often sensitive nature of debates over domestic political issues, Chinese authors are somewhat reluctant to engage in debates with their peers and/or to be critical of official state policy.

But when it comes to debating China's core interests, the results are totally different. Some Western scholars are indeed cited; Alastair Johnston, John Mearsheimer, David Shambaugh, Avery Goldstein, Michael Swaine, Robert Ross, and Shaun Breslin, among others. However, none of them is cited by more than three articles and have much less influence than the western political scientists that inform the legitimacy debate. Notably, John Mearsheimer, whose works have been translated into Chinese and whose views on the inevitable clash of a rising China with the existing hegemon are widely discussed in China, is only referred to in two papers. The most influential Western scholar is probably Niccolò Machiavelli, as *The Prince* is often taken as the source of the concept "national interests".⁴¹ Henry Kissinger is also a relatively familiar figure in the debates, but more as a diplomat than a scholar relating to his role in developing Sino-US relations in the 1970s.

However, at best, there is minimal engagement with external studies, and the most cited scholars are all Chinese – though none of the cited authors have anywhere near the same dominance and influence than any of the top ten scholars in the legitimacy debate. Looking wider than the specific debate over core interests, we suggest that the Chinese international relations community is much more comfortable in citing and engaging with each other in their publications and promoting different (and conflicting) ideas. Returning to the debate over core interests, Yan Xuetong, the dean of Tsinghua (Qinghua) University's Institute of International Relations and the editor of *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, is no doubt the most cited scholar (8.3%). Yan's 1996 book "*Analysis of China's National Interests*", has become something of a benchmark for subsequent research, breaking away from the definition of national interest in narrow terms (for example, the indivisibility of Taiwan from China) and promoting the evolution of new thinking, definitions and categories of national interest.⁴²

Other top cited scholars include Wang Yizhou, Wang Jisi, and Niu Xinchun. Notably, Niu Xinchun, a researcher based at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (a

³⁹ Ibid.:618

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ e.g. Yunxiang Liang, "hexinliyi: meiri jiaoxun yu zhongguo lujin (Core Interests: The Lessons from American and Japan and Chinese Path)," *renmin luntan (People's Forum)* 9 (2012).

⁴² Zhang, "zhongguo hexinliyi zhi bian (the Debate on China's Core Interests).":19

think tank related to the Ministry of State Security), is one of the few highly cited authors who is also an active writer on this topic – two of his articles are included in our database. Other less prominently cited scholars include Tang Shiping and Qin Yaqing. Luo Yuan, a retired army Major General and active political commentator known for promoting a strong nationalist line (and at times strong anti-Americanism), was also mentioned by four articles.

Which theories inform the debate?

Mearscheimer's absence from the debate might seem even more surprising given that realism is the most often referred to explanatory theoretical international relations theory. And there is an overlap here with the prominence of the realist scholar Yan Xuetong as the most cited author. We also find some critics of realism, though, and there is certainly no single Chinese theoretical (realist) position. For example, one article argues that American strategic misunderstandings of China is partly caused by realistic views; for example, when China actively develops its relations with African countries, the US considers it as “the so-called neocolonialism” and “China's cooperation with Myanmar, Venezuela, Sudan among others is interpreted as ‘irresponsible’ and ‘support anti-US forces’”.⁴³ There is more to theory, though, than IR theories. 12.96 per cent of the articles refer to varieties of Marxism – either Marxism itself (12.96%), Engelism (6.48%), or Leninism (6.48%). Again, the overall figure is adjusted to avoid double counting where a paper refers to more than one type of Marxist thinking. We should note, though, that the overwhelming majority of these papers refer to Marxism when they are explaining what China's core interests are (i.e.: socialist ideology and the socialist political economy/political system) rather than explaining the nature of international relations and the global order.

Some argue that China should develop its own international relations theories, so that it can create a discourse system in its favour rather than relying on Western theories. The basic argument here is that dominant theories have been developed in the west simply by looking at western historical experiences and influenced by western (individualistic) philosophical trends. They claim to be “international” and by extension universal, but in reality cannot explain or predict the behaviour of non-western countries like China that have very different philosophical, cultural and historical contexts. Hence the importance of developing an indigenous national security view that is generated from ancient Chinese strategic thoughts on national security rather than just importing (inappropriate) western concepts.⁴⁴

The same basic thinking about the relationship between western theory and Chinese experience can lead to a subtly different position which we can explore by turning back to the debate over core interests. The term itself is typically seen to have travelled to China from the west. And a number of authors take western understandings as their starting point for understanding what China's core interests are (or should be). 12.3% of articles discuss how

⁴³ Changzhen Niu and Gang Xu, "zhanlve huxin yu zhongmei guanxi (Strategic Mutual Trust and Sino-US Relations)," *guoji zhengzhi (International Forum)* 12, no. 3 (2010):14

⁴⁴ For example of Chinese security concepts, please see Chaohui Yin, "zhongguo gudai guojia anquan zhanlve sixiang de jiejian jiazhi (Reference Value of Chinese Ancient Strategic Thinking of National Security)," *lilun yu tansuo (Theoretical Exploration)* 5, no. 203 (2013).

other countries (including the US, the UK, Singapore, Japan, and the Soviet Union) identify and/or protect their core interests. How the US in particular has been identifying and protecting its core interests is a major source of reference for Chinese intellectuals to elaborate their views on China's core interests. Using American categorizations of national interests as examples,⁴⁵ many argue that China should also disentangle national interests into several categories in order to define core interests more clearly.⁴⁶ But as is the case with other terms that have come in from the outside, it is not enough just to import them unaltered from the original. Just as Mao argued that Marxism-Leninism should be viewed as guiding principles that needed to be indigenised to reflect the specifics of the Chinese context, so today "Western" theories need to be *modified* to make them appropriate for China. Hence the ubiquity of the suffix "with Chinese characteristics" (though a prefix – you zhongguo tese de – in Chinese) to indigenise a whole range of concepts that have come into China from foreign discourses.

In total, only 4.6% of articles refer to Chinese international relations theories as an explanatory tool. The most common form of indigenous thinking, though, is not a new theory but a relatively old one. While Mao Zedong's "Theory of the Three Worlds" might not be an international relations theory as such (for example, in the way that liberalism or realism is), it is often treated as one in Chinese discourses.⁴⁷ For example, a professor based at the CPS, Gong Li, argues that

"contemporary Chinese diplomatic theories – including the views of international cooperation that advances with the times, concepts of national interests that balance interests with justice, active international system views, the overall comprehensive vision, and people-oriented diplomatic values among others – are all derived from Mao Zedong's 'Three Worlds Theory'."⁴⁸

By comparison, a quarter of the articles refer to Chinese culture and philosophy as playing an important and often dominant role in the creation of Chinese discourses of core interests (interests with Chinese characteristics). Here, there is an emphasis on distinctly Chinese historical-cultural traditions that emphasise harmony, which have become embedded in China's contemporary "peaceful development" philosophy and strategy.⁴⁹ The roots of how China conceives its core interests are thus found in "One China – an ancient Chinese national

⁴⁵ e.g. Robert Ellsworth, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, *America's National Interests: A Report from the Commission on America's National Interests* (Washington, D.C.: Report for Commission on America's National Interests, 2000).

⁴⁶ e.g. Yi Zhao, "ba zhongguo de hexinliyi jieding de geng qingxi zhunque (to Define China's Core Interests More Clearly and Accurately)," *shijie zhishi*(*World Affairs*) 14 (2011); Xinchun Niu, "zhongguo zai zhongdong de liyi yu yingxiangli fenxi (Analyze China's Interests and Influence in the Middle East)," *xiandai guoji guanxi* (*Contemporary International Relations*) 10 (2013):47; Gonglong Wang, "guojia hexinliyi jiqi jieding (Core National Interests and Their Definition)," *shanghai xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* (*The Journal of Shanghai Administration Institute*) 12, no. 6 (2011):77.

⁴⁷ Whether the theory is really Mao's or perhaps owes more to others like Zhou Enlai might be debatable, but in these debates the theory is firmly associated with Mao. See, for example, discussed by e.g. Li Gong, "'sange shijie huafen lilun dui dangdai zhongguo de shenyuan yingxiang' ('Three World' Theory's Profound Impacts on Contemporary China)," *zhongguo shehui kexue* (*China's Social Science*) 8 (2012); Zhang, "zhongguo hexinliyi zhibian (the Debate on China's Core Interests)."; Hua Xing, "zhong ou guanxi de kuoyueshi fazhan (Leapfrog Development of China-Eu Relations)," *guoji wenti yanjiu* (*International Affairs Studies*), no. 1 (2010).

⁴⁸ Gong, "'sange shijie huafen lilun dui dangdai zhongguo de shenyuan yingxiang' ('Three World' Theory's Profound Impacts on Contemporary China).":29

⁴⁹ Li Gong, "zou heping fazhan daolu yu guojia hexinliyi de weihu (Peaceful Development and the Maintenance of National Core Interests)," *dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* (*Contemporary World and Socialism*) 5 (2013).

security philosophy that has lasted for thousands of years”.⁵⁰ As “using Western political theories to explain the so-called ‘national core interests’ can very easily mislead public opinion”,⁵¹ there is a need to be flexible and create a form of “core interests with Chinese characteristics” that is more inward-looking focussing on China’s own cultural traditions.

In most of the literature arguing for both a Chinese theory and the importance of Chinese characteristics, the emphasis is rather “defensive”; on being able to explain why predictions that China will not and cannot rise peacefully are wrong. But we also found a more proactive (if not offensive) position emerging as well. For example, one article argues that:

“the rising China should export philosophies and ideas to the field of international relations, disseminate the ‘ethics’ of Chinese international relations, build the image of ‘Confucius’, and establish ethical standards of international relations and international politics that are based on Chinese philosophies. In this way, it will help ... to enhance China’s discursive power in the field of international relations”.⁵²

Ultimately, though, arguably the most striking conclusion of our theoretical analysis is the overall lack of theoretical engagement in the literature. Although realism is the most commonly referred to theory, it is only referred to in 13.88 per cent of articles. If we add in liberalism and idealism (in 8.33% and 4.63% of papers), neo-liberalism (2.77%) and constructivism (0.92%) and then discount for double counting (i.e. papers that refer to more than one theory) only 20.37% of all papers refer to the mainstream international relations theories. Or put another way, almost four-fifths of the papers didn’t refer to IR theory at all! Moreover, we explicitly use the word “refer” here as a number of the papers simply refer to realism and/or liberalism as theoretical schools without elucidating a preference for one over the other as the most effective explanatory theory. Finally, we note that when realism is invoked as an explanatory theory, it is typically to explain the behaviour of others (and even more typically, of the USA), rather than to understand Chinese actions and intentions.

Writing on Chinese analyses of the international political economy of globalisation, Zhu and Pearson argued that:

“the literature in general is not oriented to theory-building, which makes it impossible to conclude that there is a Chinese school of thought on this topic. Instead, the scholarship is largely policy-driven; there is a strong impulse – reflected even in the standard format of articles – to provide positive policy advice to Chinese policy-makers.”⁵³

However, in the same issue of *Review of International Political Economy*, Pang and Wang finds that when it comes to the study of international institutions and global governance,

⁵⁰ Yin, "zhongguo gudai guojia anquan zhanlve sixiang de jiejian jiazhi (Reference Value of Chinese Ancient Strategic Thinking of National Security).":65

⁵¹ Mian Yang, "pingheng zhongguo waijiao de gangxing yu rouxing (to Balance the Rigidity and Flexibility of China's Diplomacy)," *shijie zhishi (World Affairs)* 5 (2011):44

⁵² *Ibid.*:44

⁵³ Zhu and Pearson, "Globalization and the Role of the State: Reflections on Chinese International and Comparative Political Economy Scholarship." p1216

"foreign scholarship plays a role" and many authors cite relevant Western theories.⁵⁴ Clearly, our findings chime more with the conclusions of the former than the latter. Rather than being driven by theoretical concerns, we instead find a dominance of two other issues. First, the reactive nature of scholarship to specific events, and second, the importance of key leaders in establishing political agendas that in turn generate new academic agendas.

Event Driven Scholarship

The dominant themes in the literature are China's security and territorial disputes, currency and financial security, energy security, and China's political/ideological system. The specific lens through which these issue areas are discussed very much follows events. For example, all four articles that place the EU as the challenger to China's core interests appeared in 2009-10 after French President Nicolas Sarkozy, met the Dalai Lama in December 2008.⁵⁵ As France held the rotating Presidency of the EU at the time, this was taken as a European, rather than simply national, interference in Chinese sovereign affairs that seriously challenged China's core interests (more of which shortly).⁵⁶

After 2009, the focus of attention shifted to Sino-US affairs, which is by far the single most debated relationship (and dealt with in 31.48 % of papers). By 2011, another new shift can be discerned as debates began to focus on territorial disputes in the South China Sea and over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island. Here we note a subtle but important difference between concern about others interfering in issues that they have no right to try to influence ("internal" Chinese politics in Tibet and Xinjiang), and more fundamental questions about the nature of Chinese territorial claims – what the national territory is (or should be) that China has the right to protect and defend. Taiwan has typically been treated in the first category, but can fall into the second type of debates as well. It is in the desire to ensure that China's own definition of its territory is accepted by others that we see the source of an increasing number of assertions of the need for China to define its core interests more clearly, and to change its grand strategy in order to better protect them. Not surprisingly, this shift in emphasis was also reflected in a change in geographical interest away from bilateral relations with the US and Europe to regional issues in China's own backyard. From 2011-2013, over twenty percent of papers had a specific regional focus.⁵⁷ However, as Zhang notes, when Chinese academics discuss Southeast Asia, the role of the US in the region and what this means for China is never far below the surface (either implicitly or explicitly).⁵⁸

Which Leaders and their Visions Matter?

⁵⁴ Zhongying Pang and Hongying Wang, "Debating International Institutions and Global Governance: The Missing Chinese Ipe Contribution," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 6 (2013).

⁵⁵ China had already cancelled a planned EU-China summit a month earlier to protest at Sarkozy's plan to meet the Dalai Lama.

⁵⁶ e.g. Zhaorong Mei, "dui zhongou guanxi de zai renshi (a Further Understanding of China-Europe Relations)," *ouzhou yanjiu (European Studies)* 5 (2009).

⁵⁷ Using the terms East Asia, Southeast Asia, Pacific Asia or China's periphery

⁵⁸ Zhang, "Chinese Perceptions of US Return to Southeast Asia and the Prospect of China's Peaceful Rise."

Given that the debates are heavily event influenced, it is perhaps not surprising that they are also very heavily influenced by the views and statements of top leaders.⁵⁹ Hu Jintao was party leader from 2002-12 and thus for almost all of our census period (2008-13). His words and opinions are cited in 29.62% of articles. But even though he was only China's top leader for just over a year in our census period, Xi Jinping's – who is perceived to have taken a tougher position on the issue of core interests than his predecessors – discourse on “core interests” that we quoted at the beginning of this article is cited by 33.33 per cent of all papers published in 2013. In addition, 19.04% articles published in 2013 mentioned Xi's ideological slogan the “China Dream”: a still rather undefined concept but which is built around the notion of China's national rejuvenation. For example, an article published in *Red Flag Manuscript* argues that the “China Dream opens a new page of China's national defence strategy” and “China should develop a powerful military defense system in order to protect its core interests”.⁶⁰

We also find that in recent years' there has been an emerging view which argues that China should adopt a new grand strategy in order to better protect its core interests. In Hu Jintao's era, China's grand strategy mainly followed Deng Xiaoping's vision of “taoguang yanghui”, typically translated as “keeping a low profile” implying that China should avoid taking international responsibilities and develop quietly. Arguably the single most important debate in Chinese international relations since about 2009 is whether it is not time to abandon this position and take a new more proactive global role designed to protect China's core interests and increase its influence on global politics.⁶¹ There is general agreement that China has prioritised short term economic interests designed to facilitate its development goals over longer term more broadly defined national security interests. As a CASS researcher puts it, “China is racing against time and trading space for time. It has sacrificed parts of its security interests in exchange for the period of strategic opportunities”.⁶² And this strategy is seen as being largely successful in helping get China to where it is today as a Great Power. For Yan Xuetong, “keeping a low profile” was highly appropriate when China still lacked economic prosperity. But as China has become much more wealthy, “the exclusive pursuit of economic wealth has no longer matched China's national interests any more” and the time is ripe for China to take a greater international role (including taking on more international responsibilities).⁶³ This idea is elaborated in Yan's recent article which argues that China

⁵⁹ In addition to the top leaders, we also noted the importance of senior Chinese officials in the debate. Dai Bingguo, the former State Councillor, is mentioned by 8.55% articles – partly because his discourse of China's core interests had been the most authoritative one before the 2011 White Paper was published. In addition, 4.6% articles mentioned Yang Jiechi, the current state councillor in charge of foreign affairs.

⁶⁰ Da Yang, “zhongguo meng kaiqi heping fazhan de guofang zhanlve (China Dream Opens the National Defense Strategy of Peaceful Development),” *hongqi wengao (Red Flag Manuscript)* 22 (2013):15

⁶¹ Hu Jian (2012) “cong taoguang yanghui dao jiji zuowei – zhongguo wajiao siwen, zhanlve yu ceyue de zhuanbian zoulun (From ‘Taoguang yanghui’ to ‘active conduct’ - the transformation of China's Diplomatic Thinking, Strategy and Tactics),” *Lilun daokan (Theoretical Guide)*, (4): 107-109.

⁶² Junsheng Wang, “zhanlve huanjing de bianqian yu guojia liyi de jieding - zhongguo guoji jiaose de siwei gexin (Changes in Strategic Environment and Definition of National Interests - Innovative Thinking of China's Role in International Affairs),” *jiaoxue yu yanjiu (Teaching and Research)* 3 (2011):74

⁶³ Qinghua Fan, “zhongmei guanxi: ruhe caineng jiankang fazhan (Sino-US Relations: How to Develop Healthily),” *shijie zhishi (World Affairs)* 5 (2011):26

should adopt “striving for achievement” as its new grand strategy; and indeed, already has since the assumption to power of Xi Jinping.⁶⁴

Yan’s view does not reflect a new consensus, and is criticised by some. For example, a professor in the CPS argues that China is still under-developed and thus development instead of security is still its primary task.⁶⁵ To many Chinese, the current international environment is considered as “a period of strategic opportunities” for the rise of China. Thus, China should focus on economic development and keep quiet. And notwithstanding Yan’s high profile, we still find that a quarter of all articles refer to Deng Xiaoping who was the architect of the “low profile” strategy in the first place.

As we will discuss later, these two contrary views on the fundamental basis of China’s grand strategy are partly based on their different evaluations on the level of security and understanding of China’s core interests. To what extent China will change its grand strategy is still far from clear. What we can say with certainty is that there is a vigorous debate over the costs and benefits of the “keeping a low profile” strategy. Considering the significance of this potential paradigm shift of China’s grand strategy, our future study will look into how this reevaluation of the level of security of China’s core interests change China’s grand strategy.

What are China’s Core Interests?

Then, what exactly are China’s core interests? We find that “core interests” is a vague concept open to interpretation in the Chinese discourse – even after the 2011 White Paper was released. A majority of articles discuss China’s core interests in a very implicit way. Only 23.1% articles clearly define what China’s core interests are. In this set of articles, most of their views are consistent with the official tone, and evolve over time as the official discourse changes. Before 2011, many articles referred to Dai Bingguo’s definition of China’s core interests “to maintain China’s fundamental system and state security; state sovereignty and territorial integrity; and the continued stable development of the economy and society.”⁶⁶ After the 2011 White Paper was released in September 2011, 31.4% of subsequent articles refer to China’s core interests as defined by the White Paper.

Although the academic views did not go against the official line, this official line in itself is not particularly tight, and allows for considerable leeway for interpretation. For example, there is no consensus over whether China’s core interests can include those that lie outside of China. On the one hand, some argue that all China’s core interests are domestic issues. It is

⁶⁴ Xuetong Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014).

⁶⁵ Liu, "guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi (Reflections on China's Diplomacy in Recent Years).":40

⁶⁶ Bingguo Dai, "Dai Bingguo: The Core Interests of the People’s Republic of China" (2009)retrieved from <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/08/dai-bingguo-%E6%88%B4%E7%A7%89%E5%9B%BD-the-core-interests-of-the-prc/> on 10 November 2014

argued that China is an “inward-looking country” and thus its culture, traditions and philosophy determined that *all* of China’s core interests are “within China”.⁶⁷

On the other hand, some argue that China’s core interests have to go beyond a simple sovereign territorial constraint. The White Paper includes “the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development” as a Core Interest. So for Niu Xinchun energy interests in the Middle East simply must be part of China’s core interests “because Middle East energy will materially affect China’s sustainable growth”.⁶⁸ Another article written by Li Zhongjie, a deputy director of the Party History Research Center, and Li Bing, a deputy director in the CCP’s Department of Organization, argues that the international strategic passage “involves” China’s core interests because it relates to international trade, security and sovereignty.⁶⁹ Specifically, they consider the First Island Chain as the US and Japan’s strategic plans to contain China and argue that “to recover Taiwan is the key to break the First Island Chain and thus to solve all of China’s strategic dilemma on maritime security”.⁷⁰ Thus, they concluded that China should develop and enhance its navy in order to “prepare for the military actions to recover Taiwan and to protect Chinese islands, resources, and offshore transport routes”.⁷¹

Of course, we should note here that what is considered to be an internal domestic Chinese issue in Chinese debates can include territories that others might think are not Chinese at all. Crucially though, if they are deemed to be in China, then there is no leeway for discussion or negotiation with others at all; territorial integrity is a bottom line non-negotiable interest. The position of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang as inalienable and integral of China is taken for granted and not open for discussion at all. So when they are considered in the debate (in 24.07%, 15.74%, and 8.3% of papers respectively), the main focus is on foreign governments’ policies – especially of the US – toward those regions; more so even than the potential separatist policies promoted by restive forces in these regions themselves. It is argued that the policies of those foreign governments “seriously challenged” China’s core interests. Sometimes ethnicity rather than territory is the referent point, but again here the focus is on why only China can deal with (and perhaps even in some discourses talk about) China’s ethnic affairs and that overseas anti-China forces have been attempting to use ethnic affairs to split China.⁷²

A much smaller group of writers argue that the South China Sea is a core interest. For example, a professor in the Shanghai Party School argues that South China Sea Islands

⁶⁷ Shulong Chu and Chen Ying, "dui zhongmei guanxi de lixing kaoliang yu zhanwang (Rational Thoughts and the Prospect of Sino-US Relations)," *dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi (Contemporary World and Socialism)* 4 (2012):27

⁶⁸ Niu, "zhongguo zai zhongdong de liyi yu yingxiangli fenxi (Analyze China's Interests and Influence in the Middle East).":47

⁶⁹ Zhongjie Li and Bing Li, "zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlve tongdao wenti shang de zhanlve duice (Pay Close Attention to Make China's Strategy to Respond to International Strategic Passage)," *dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi (Contemporary World and Socialism)* 5 (2011):108; 109

⁷⁰ Ibid.:110

⁷¹ Ibid.:112

⁷² e.g. Zidong Yu, "lun minzu wenti yu zhongguo hexinliyi de xiangguanxi (Discuss the Relevance of Ethnic Affairs and China's Core Interests)," *renmin luntan (People's Forum)* 350 (2011).

“definitely belongs to China’s core interests because it relates with China’s national survival, security and development. Even if China does not have sufficient ability to control them, it is objectively an integral part of China’s core interests”.⁷³

Another disputed area, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is also considered as a core interest in a couple of articles. One article argues that

“Diaoyu Islands have always been China’s territory and thus it concerns China’s core interests – that should never allow others to infringe. In this regard, there is nothing to negotiate with Japan.”

The author’s policy recommendation is that any future negotiation between China and Japan should “primarily focus on how Japan should completely return Diaoyu Islands to China”.⁷⁴ However, we should note that a mere 3.7% of papers refer to the South China Sea islands as constituting core interest, and only 1.85% refer to the Diaoyu Islands in the same way.

A smaller group of scholars also extend the range of China’s core interests to the Korean peninsula (1.85%). For example, Niu Xinchun argues that “the stability and development of the Korean peninsula directly related to China’s core interests”.⁷⁵ A more explicit and ambitious view is held by a professor of Jilin University, Xiao Xi. Xiao wrote in an article funded by two governmental projects argues that regional leadership in Northeast Asia is China’s core interests. More specifically, Xiao argues that “China’s core interests in Northeast Asia is reflected in ensuring that the dominance in the Northeast Asia region does not fall into the hands of any other major power, denuclearization, regional stability, trade and economic cooperation, the Diaoyu Islands, and Taiwan”.⁷⁶ She also argues that China should use bilateral and multilateral free trade to promote Free Trade Zone in the Northeast Asia and thus provide an institutionalized basis for China’s dominant position in the region.⁷⁷

Ideology and the political system are also mentioned by some as core interests. It is argued that the infiltration of Western political values has seriously threatened China’s socialist ideology and political system and thus China’s core interests. Thus, “we must emphasize the struggle for values in order to prevent national core interests from being violated”.⁷⁸ Other specifically identified core interests in the debate include ensuring economic growth, human rights, the political system, ideology, environmental issues, the development of socialism and China’s modernization. However, they are perhaps surprisingly very much minor issues with none of them mentioned in more than four articles.

Only seven articles clearly identify what they consider the most important core interest to be. National sovereignty and national security are considered by two and one articles

⁷³ Wang, "guojia hexinliyi jiqi jieding (Core National Interests and Their Definition)":80

⁷⁴ Jiang, "diaoyudao wenti yu zhongri guanxi (Diaoyu Islands and Sino-Japanese Relations)":48

⁷⁵ Xinchun Niu, "zhongmei zhanlve huxin: gainian, wenti ji tiaozhan (the Strategic Mutual Trust between China and the Us: Concepts, Issues and Challenges)," *xindai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)* 3 (2010):4

⁷⁶ Xiao, "dongbeiyi anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlve tiaozheng (on the Trend of Security in Northeast Asia and Adjustment of China's Strategies)":76

⁷⁷ Ibid.:79.

⁷⁸ Yanbin Chen and Bin Zhou, "guowai jiazhi guan de ninglian jiqi qishi (the Summary of Foreign Values and Its Implications)," *makesizhuyi yanjiu (Marxism Studies)* 10 (2012):142

respectively as the most important core interests. By comparison, five articles argue that it is specifically the issue of Taiwan that is China's most important core interest. Collectively, the biggest threat to China's core interests comes from attempts to destroy China's territorial integrity. This includes a focus on domestic independence forces in Taiwan (20.37%) Tibet (11.11%) and Xinjiang (8.33%), separatism more broadly (11.11%), disputes in the South China (10.18%) and East China (8.3%) seas, and the potential consequences of Japanese militarism (2.77%). Related issues like generic and non-ethnic specific terrorism (1.85%) and ideological threats (5.6%) are discussed less often.

But by far the biggest problem for China in its maintenance of its core interests is the United States. Taiwan is not just important in itself for China, but is also considered to be the biggest problem in Sino-US relations. Moreover, the US is blamed as trying to sabotage this most important core interest. For example, one article argues that "regarding the issue of the most central and important interest [Taiwan], the US has always been interfering, challenging, and damaging China's core interests".⁷⁹ In total, 14.81% of papers refer to US' policy toward China on a range of other issues (especially Xinjiang, Tibet, and human rights policies) threatens China's core interests. It is argued that the US has never "cared" about China's core interests. For example, one article argues that "the US has never scruples in China's core interests... the more important the issues are concerned with China's national core interests, the more likely that the US will 'challenge' them".⁸⁰ In two articles, Chu Shulong, a professor at Tsinghua University, goes a step further and argues that the core interests of the US and China cannot be resolved because they are "oppositional".⁸¹ It is argued that core interests of the US and China are "opposite and confrontational ... this fundamentally determines that Sino-US relations is impossible to be friendly – it may even be an opposing and confrontational relationship".⁸² This view perhaps matches with the predication of great power conflict theory that the core interests of the rising power and the existing hegemon will eventually clash – though without directly engaging with the extant (Western) literature on the theme.

As such, there is a tendency to treat tensions in US-China relations an unfortunate but natural fact of life in a changing world order. As one article puts it, "it is not easy to ask the US to give up its hegemonic attitude and actions; and it is impossible to ask China to continue to tolerate the US' actions that damaged China's core interests. So, a struggle is inevitable".⁸³

Level of Threats

⁷⁹ Shulong Chu and Liwei Fang, "zhongmei guanxi de changqi zoushi (Long-Term Trend of Sino-US Relations)," *xiandai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)* 6 (2010):22

⁸⁰ Qingzu Bian, "dui 2010 nian zhongmei liangguo boyi de sikao (a Reflection on China-US Gamesmanship in 2010)," *heping he fazhan (Peace and Development)* 2, no. 120 (2011):21

⁸¹ Chu and Ying, "dui zhongmeiguanxi de lixing kaoliang yu zhanwang (Rational Thoughts and the Prospect of Sino-US Relations).":27; Chu and Fang, "zhongmei guanxi de changqi zoushi (Long-Term Trend of Sino-US Relations)."

⁸² Chu and Fang, "zhong me guanxi de changqi zoushi (Long-Term Trend of Sino-US Relations).":22

⁸³ Feng Dong, "zhongmei junshi guanxi jiuqing zenme le? (What Is Wrong with Us-China Military Relations?)," *shijie zhishi (World Affairs)* 13 (2010):42

Chinese intellectuals have very different evaluations of the level of (in)security of China's core interests, which in turn results in very different policy recommendations. 20.37% of articles use the words "challenged" or "damaged" (weihai, sunhai, or tiaozhan) which generates the conclusion that China should abandon its keeping a low profile" strategy. For example, Zhu Feng, a professor of Beijing University, argues that

"China's core interests have faced unprecedented challenges since the Cold War. If sovereignty, political system, security, development and domestic stability constitute China's core interests, then, in this day and age, China's core interests have been suffering from unprecedented significant challenges in the past 20 years".⁸⁴

Zhu concludes by arguing that China needs a new grand strategy in order to protect its core interests; a position that echoes Yan Xuetong's above-mention "striving for achievement" strategy.

By contrast, others argue that none of China's core interests faces problems and thus China should not change its grand strategy. For example, a professor at the CPS argues that:

"if we assess carefully, these six core interests [defined by the 2011 White Paper] are not under threat. Although the disputes in South China Sea concerns territory and sovereignty, it is not the same thing as territorial integrity and national sovereignty being under threat. Moreover, this problem has already existed for a long time. In the past 30 years, if China did not abandon development as its first priority because of the South China Sea, why should we change the approach now?"⁸⁵

A third, middle way view, suggests that only some of China's core interests are confronted with problems. For example, a professor of Beijing University, Liang Yunxiang, argues that "there are no big problems for China's national sovereignty and security..... but there are some prominent problems in terms of territorial integrity and national unity".⁸⁶

Concerned Countries

We noted above the focus on the US as the major threat to China's core interests. This focus becomes even more pronounced when we expand the analysis to include challenges to China's more broadly defined *national* interests. With this definition, over half of the articles (56.4%) see the US as damaging China's national interests. Other frequent mentioned challenger countries include Japan (16.66%), Vietnam (8.3%), and Philippines (7.4%). Most of these articles involve China's territorial disputes with countries which are typically referred to as "unreasonable trouble-makers". It is argued that these countries have been

⁸⁴ Zhu, "weihu hexinliyi jidai waijiao dazhanlve (to Protect China's Core Interests Needs Grand Strategy)":30

⁸⁵ Liu, "guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi (Reflections on China's Diplomacy in Recent Years)":41

⁸⁶ Liang, "hexin liyi: meiri jiaoxun yu zhongguo lujin (Core Interests:The Lessons from American and Japan and Chinese Path)":29

taking American strategy of “returning to Asia” as an opportunity to “muddy the waters” in order to obtain more benefits when negotiating with China.⁸⁷

Interestingly, we also find three articles implicitly blamed North Korea, the semi-ally of China, for damaged China’s interests. The first focuses on China’s direct disputes with North Korea on issues of oil, gas and fishery while the second considers a more indirect threat generated by North Korea’s nuclear program. The third also looks at an indirect threat by arguing that as long as North Korea is the cause of uncertainty and instability, then the US will also use North Korea as a means of putting pressure on China.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, as a CASS researcher points out, there is a difference between countries causing problems on the one hand, and being considered to be “enemies” on the other:

“in fact, China does not have a real enemy.... China still has much strategic and tactical space for operations. Thus, China should not block that space and make enemies when there is a conflict.”⁸⁹

Indeed, despite the largely negative image of the US, there is a recognition that it might be a force for good too, with 11.11% of articles arguing that the US may help or has already helped China to protect its interests; most notably when it comes to mediating Chinese territorial/sovereignty issues relating to Taiwan⁹⁰ and Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands.⁹¹ One article even argues that Japan can work with China to secure Chinese interests in and over Taiwan.⁹²

Noticeably, nobody argues that Russia has damaged or is a threat to China’s interests.⁹³ In other words, the image of Russia in the Chinese discourse is almost purely positive. We find that 5.5% articles argue that Russia will or has helped China to protect its interests, and Sino-Russian relations is also considered by some as “one of the most important bilateral relations”⁹⁴ and that both share a similar position in the global order, and a similar world view. As a director of the China Institute of International Studies points out

⁸⁷ For example, Xiangyang Li, “zhongguo jueqi guochengzhong jiejie bianhai wenti de chulu (Solutions of Maritime Territory During the Rise of China),” *xiandai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)* 8 (2012):18

⁸⁸ Changlin Guo, “mei zhanlve zhongxin dongyi hou de zhongguo zhoubian anquan huanjing (China's Peripheral Security after the US Conducted the Eastward Shift of Its Strategic Center of Gravity),” *xiandai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*.10 (2013):16

⁸⁹ Yunling Zhang, “xianshi waijiao buneng jingping ganqing yongshi, xinxing daguo yao neng naozhu xingzi (Realistic Diplomacy Should Not Depend on Emotions, Emerging Power Should Live with Temper),” *renmin luntan(People's Forum)* 12 (2013):55

⁹⁰ e.g. Yuan Ding, “guojia hexinliyi yu yatai xiaoguo waijiao zhanlve yanjiu (National Core Interests and Asia-Pacific 'Small Countries' Diplomatic Strategic Studies),” *dongnan daxue xuebao- zhexue shehui kexueban (Journal of Southeast University - Philosophy and Social Science)* 15 (2013):174

⁹¹ e.g. Shuzhen Li, “cong diaoyudao zhengduan kan zhongmeiri daguo de jiaoliang yu boyi (from the Disputes in Diaoyu Islands to Study China, Us, and Japan's Strategic Game and Contest),” *sixiang jiaoyu lilun daokan (Leading Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education)* 7 (2013).

⁹² Ding, “ guojia hexinliyi yu yatai xiaoguo waijiao zhanlve yanjiu (National Core Interests and Asia-Pacific 'Small Countries' Diplomatic Strategic Studies).”:174

⁹³ Although conflicting economic interests are mentioned.

⁹⁴ e.g. Mingwen Zhao, “zhong e quanxin de guojia hezuo moshi (the New Cooperation Model between China and Russia),” *liaowang xinwen zhoukan (Outlook Weekly)* 25 (2009):56

“for a long time, China and Russia have been discriminated by the West in varying degrees. The establishment of Sino-Russian strategic partnership can complement each other’s advantages and expand our space for cooperation to the maximum.”⁹⁵

Not surprisingly, one conclusion is that China should strengthen its strategic partnership with Russia.⁹⁶

We also find that some are critical of a widely imagined Sino-Russian alliance. It is argued that anti-West cooperation is not the core of Sino-Russian relations and that both China and Russian do have to work with the West.⁹⁷ As such, establishing anything that is perceived simply as an anti-US alliance would actually make it harder for both to deal with the West, and thus damage their ability to protect their core interests.⁹⁸

What, then, should China do to protect its core interests? 15.74% articles argue that China should “resolutely safeguard” (jianjue wei hu) its core interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union is used an example to warn the consequences of failing to defend national core interests. For example, one article argues that:

“after 1989, the Soviet Union repeatedly yielded to international pressure and failed to take any effective action to protect its national unity. It completely lost core interests and eventually disintegrated. Thus, whether core interests can be protected has vital implications to sovereign states.”⁹⁹

While emphasizing on the uncompromising stance on core interests, 10.18% articles argue that China could compromise on some non-core interests, or look for ways to bargain and trade-off core and non-core interests. For example, an article on the topic of Sino-US foreign exchange argues that “if necessary, we can certainly make concessions on the dispute of secondary interests. However, regarding the dispute of core interests, we should not compromise”.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

There is something of a ground-swell around the idea that China should now be seeking to be more proactive in asserting and defending its core interests in an international order that often seems to be disinclined to change to facilitate China’s rise (to say the very least). But there remain considerable voices of caution as well. This caution is in part at least built on a realisation that perceptions matter in international politics. How China is seen by others – for

⁹⁵ Ibid.:56

⁹⁶ e.g. Li and Li, “zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlv tongdao wenti shang de zhanlv duice (Pay Close Attention to Make China's Strategy to Respond to International Strategic Passage).”:112

⁹⁷ e.g. Yi Jiang, “bu kaopu de zhong e jiemengshuo (Sino-Russia Alliances Do Not Fly),” *shijie zhishi(World Affairs)* 5 (2012).

⁹⁸ Ibid.:53

⁹⁹ Yi Zhao, “ba zhongguo de hexin liyi jieding de geng qingxi zhunque (to Define China's Core Interests More Clearly and Accurately),” *Shijie zhishi(World Affairs)*.14 (2011):65

¹⁰⁰ Lei Zhang, “lun zhongmei shuangbian touzi xieding fanben: guanyu waihui zhuan yi tiaokuan de fenqi (the Differences in Model Bilateral Investment Treaty of China and United States on Foreign Currency Transference Clause),” *shanghai jinrong (Shanghai Finance)* 10 (2013):93

example, if China is seen as being assertive or even nationalistically aggressive – can have real consequences if those others then initiate policies based on these perceptions to prevent China getting what it wants.

We offer no value judgement on which approach is right or what methods China should pursue to protect its core interests. Our much more modest intention with this paper was simply to open domestic discourses to a wider international relations audience to show the contours of the debate, and the considerable plurality of ideas that can be found when it comes to debating China's place in the world in China. Utilising content analysis built around the construction of a rigorous coding manual (that went through a number of iterations as the study evolved and problems were identified) provides an excellent way of undertaking such a study. Our systematic approach to studying Chinese text not only involves conventional, quantitative-based content analysis where methodological rigour is required, but also entails making qualitative judgements on orientations where the prowess in distinguishing nuances in the Chinese language is a must. To be sure, it is not the only way of trying to understand the intentions that are driving the nature of China's rise, but it gives us the ability to analyse and articulate debates and discourses in a relatively large body of work in a relatively short and concise manner.

Collectively the papers we have studied point to a consensus of sorts that China is misunderstood, and that powerful forces are looking for any opportunity to paint China in a negative light. We might also suggest that they collectively point to a country that is trying to come to terms with its new found power in the global order. In particular, the global financial crisis helped changed perceptions in China about China's place in the world relative to other (existing) powers. Wang Zaibang argues that the first two decades of the new millennium represent a "Strategic Opportunity Period" for China as a result of a global adjustments in power distributions (that the crisis was a key part of).¹⁰¹ The debate over core interests is just one part of a wider process of China – or more correctly, Chinese thinkers – coming to terms with this new status, and working out how best this theoretical power can best be translated into actual policies that serve national interests in ways that don't generate negative external responses. The next task for the authors of this paper, then, is to turn our attention to Chinese discourses on what means should be used to secure these interests.

¹⁰¹ Wang Zaibang, "Shilun zhanlue jiyuqi xin jieduan neihan yu tiaojian de bianhua (Changing contexts and Contents in the New Strategic Opportunity Period)", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (Contemporary International Relations), 2 (2013): 1–6.