

## China's New Normal: National and Global Dimensions

Roundtable contribution, Duisburg, 30.11.2016

Sebastian Harnisch, Heidelberg University

The concept of China's new normal is hardly ever applied systematically to foreign and security policy (but see Jisi 2016; Kavalski 2013; Tan 2014; Zhao 2015). I think this is a serious negligence, because there is much to learn: First, even if it refers primarily to rebalancing China's economy into a more sustainable mode only, this rebalancing will have serious implications for the world economy and China's external conduct (Leonard 2016). Secondly, recent debates on China's foreign policy – the status quo or the assertiveness debate – have all been about different concepts of normality, at least implicitly. As a consequence, we lack a systematic discussion of what a “normal Chinese foreign policy” should or would look like. That is my task this afternoon. I use three western standard IR theories, but delving into the Chinese IR debate later on.

**Realism** defines foreign policy “normality” as an equivalent between the relative power position of a state and its self-help behavior under anarchy. Big powers rule through force and institutions to contain rivaling competitors or groups of smaller powers. As it stands, China's recent more robust conduct in the SCS and its advancing trade and investment relations to the West and South may indicate a normal behavior for a rising global or dominant Pacific great power (Friedberg 2015). But for today and the foreseeable future, it lacks the strategic capacities, an advanced nuclear force structure, a global web of military alliances while it has growing energy, trade and investment interdependencies (Biddle/Oelrich 2016). Moreover, from a realist perspective, China's new economic normal seems to indicate that the CCP loses what F. Zakharia has called: extractive capacity, i.e. the capacity of a ruling party/regime to squeeze enough material power from a people to establish and sustain a globally dominant position by force or through a hegemonic stabilization of self-serving international institutions.

**Liberalism**, in turn, argues that a normal foreign policy seeks an equivalence between dominant domestic interests, however defined, and foreign conduct. This argument comes in several colors: one strand holds, as Hameiri and Jones have argued (2016), that China should be considered as a “transformed rising power”, that is a fragmented, decentralized and internationalized political system, in which various actors, agencies, provinces etc. pursue paradiplomatic relations. In this “republican liberal” view China's ambivalent behavior in the SCS represents the diverging claims of Hainan province advancing its territorial and administrative claims and more landlocked and export-dependent provinces. In turn, President Xi's centralization of the security policy process may then be interpreted more as a reassertion of the Party vis-à-vis rivaling domestic actors (Lampton 2015), such as bureaucracies, provinces and the PLA than as a strategic instrument for “major country

relations". Moreover, economic liberals assert that the flag follows trade and investment. In this view, it is normal that a country with globalizing interests, such as China is taking defensive measures to preserve these interests (Hille 2012). From this perspective, the Chinese airlift out of Libya via Greece was a defining moment, a new normal, because thousands of Chinese citizens needed to be rescued from state failure and civil war (Zhao 2014). In a similar vein, China's Economic corridor into Pakistan not only tries to revitalize its earlier "Go West" strategy, but also tries to mitigate its "Malakka strait dilemma", a strait through which 85% of its imports and 70-85% of its energy supplies are shipped.

The last theoretical perspective, **social constructivism**, has no fixed theory of action. It follows that normality in Chinese foreign policy is what actors/states make of it.<sup>1</sup> It also follows that we have to choose one social construction to identify who defines the new normal in which direction. I use role theory, which claims that China's role is shaped by ego and alter expectation about its functions for a designated group or region. In this view, China's foreign conduct emanates from a) the coherence of China's self-identification in the world across pertinent domestic FP actors and b) expectations by significant others, that is important friendly, rivaling or enemy states (Harnisch et al 2015).

Under this assumption, it is fair to infer that China's new normal in foreign policy is pro-active and striving for achievement, thereby ending the era of biding and hiding under Deng and his predecessors. Secondly, under President Xi foreign policy has become a means to realize the China dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In this master narrative, Xi envisions China's society as the superimposition of the collective over the individual, the delimitation of China's peaceful civilization against American/Western hegemonism, and China as a natural leader of a community of shared destiny in Asia (Callahan 2015a; Kerr 2015). Third, China's new normal foreign policy follows a relational approach by which other nations are treated as members of a pre-defined "social group" rather than as individual and sovereign members of a law-based international community (Qin 2011). It follows that China offers self-restraint, even in sensitive territorial questions (SCS), when other nations are willing to show respect and deference to China's superior position (Kreuzer 2014) while it takes a robust, often militarized stance when other decline to do so. Fourth, historically this relational self-identification is based on China's economic achievements and a growing self-confidence in the current world community and a strong Communist Party identity as the "protector" of the nation against foreign humiliation by imperialist perpetrators (Harnisch 2015; Zheng 2014). Philosophically, the resulting tension between China's inclusion and exclusion is resolved through the re-assertion of China's central position as a new socialist model in an emerging future Asian and international order (Callahan 2015b).

Notably, these new Chinese self-identifications have been met with some commensurate but also conflicting external expectations. First, the Obama administration has cautiously stepped up its major country dialogue with China, i.e. in climate policy and the cyber realm,

---

<sup>1</sup> Tan is right in criticizing Ian Manners concept of normative powers which implies that only „normative powers“ are able and willing to define what is normal in a social group of states, cf. Tan 2014: 1.

while insisting on a rule-based international order under US tutelage, esp. in the SCS. Second, commensurate counter-role taking in Asia, i.e. vis-à-vis the BRI, has been mixed at best with friendly but cautious reaction in Central Asia and more pronounced skepticism in Southeast and South Asia (Horesh/Kavalski 2014; Zhao 2016). Third, China's experience in Myanmar and towards North Korea suggests that the more assertive role taking still suffers from inconsistent policy making and incoherent policy goals (Sun 2014). It follows that China's various foreign policy actors will have to learn that their success depends not only on compatible behavior by fellow agencies, provinces but also by their foreign interlocutors.

In sum, China new normal in foreign policy is based on a political economy in which intensified investment in border region integration networks is expected to stabilize unruly areas and induce sustainable trade and investment relations with various regions to modernize China's economic sectors. The critical question is whether the selection mechanism of projects and the potential performance of these projects provide much confidence. Moreover, China's ambivalent self-identification, shifting between civilizational superimposition and historical victimhood, does not bode well for a stable relational concept of inter-state cooperation which is based on trust and a shared sense of destiny. China's new normal foreign policy may well be on its way for some unpleasant frustrations.

## Literature:

Biddle, Stephen/Oelrich, Ivan (2016) Future Warfare in the Western Pacific. Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and the Command of the Commons in East Asia, in: International Security 41(1), 7-48.

Callahan, William (2015a) Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream, Politics 35(3-4), 216-229.

Callahan, William (2015b) History, tradition and the China dream: socialist modernization in the world of great harmony, Journal of Contemporary China 24(96), 1032-1047.

Friedberg, Aaron (2015) The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness, in: Washington Quarterly 37: 4, 133-150.

Hameri, Shahar/Jones, Lee (2016) Rising Powers and state transformations: the case of China, European Journal of International Relations 22(1), 72-98.

Harnisch, Sebastian (2015) China's International Role and its 'historical self', in: Sebastian Harnisch/Sebastian Bersick/Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (Hg.): China's International Roles, London [u.a.]: Routledge, 3-21.

Harnisch, Sebastian/Bersick, Sebastian/Gottwald, Jörn-Carsten (Ed.) (2015) China's International Roles. Challenging or supporting international order? New York, London: Routledge.

Hille, K. (2012) Hu calls for China to be "maritime power", The Financial Times 08.11.2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/ebd9b4ae-296f-11e2-a604-00144feabdc0> [27.11.2016].

Horesh, Niv/Kavalski, Emilian (eds.) 2014: Asian Thought on China's Changing International Relations, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hu, Weixing (2016) Xi Jinping's 'Big Power Diplomacy' and China's Central National Security Commission (CNSC), Journal of Contemporary China 25(98), 163-177.

Jisi, Wang (2016) China-U.S. Relations Have Entered a 'new Normal', China-US Focus, 19.09.2016, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-u-s-relations-have-entered-a-new-normal> [27.11.2016].

- Kavalski, E. (2013) The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China in Context, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(2), 247 - 267.
- Kerr, David (2015) China's many Dreams, in: Kerr, D. (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on China's Search for national rejuvenation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1-9.
- Kreuzer, Peter (2016) A Comparison of Malaysian and Philippine Responses to China in the South China Sea, in: *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9(3), 239-276, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow008>.
- Lampton, David M. (2015) Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: policy coordination and political power, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24:95, 759-777, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1013366
- Leonard, Mark (Ed.) (2016) *Geo-economics with Chinese Characteristics: How China's economic might is reshaping world politics*, Davos: World Economic Forum, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GeoEconomics\\_with\\_Chinese\\_Characteristics.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GeoEconomics_with_Chinese_Characteristics.pdf)
- Qin, Yaqing (2011) Rule, Rules and Relations: Towards a Synthetic Approach to Governance, *Chinese Journal of International Relations* 4, 117-145.
- Sun, Y. (2014) China and the Changing Myanmar. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 4, 51-77.
- Tan, See Seng (2014) *Controlled Coercion: China's New Normal for Southeast Asia*, EUSC Policy Paper Series (Autumn/Winter 2014), <http://eusc.essex.ac.uk/documents/EUSC%20Regional%20See%20Seng%20China.pdf> [27.11.2016].
- Zerba, Shaio H. (2014), China's Libya Evacuation Operation: a new diplomatic imperative—overseas citizen protection, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(90), 1093-1112.
- Zhao, Hong (2016) China's One Belt One Road: An Overview of the Debate, (*Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 6), Singapore: ISEAS Publ.
- Zhao, Tong (2015) The 'New Normal' for China's Economy and Great Power Diplomacy, *China Policy Review*, March 1 2015, <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2015/03/01/new-normal-for-china-s-economy-and-great-power-diplomacy/i8pq> [27.11.2016].
- Zheng, Shiping (2014) Rising confidence behind the 'Chinese dream', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(1), 35-48.