**Is China committed to peaceful rise? Debating how to secure core interests in China**

“In facing the new situation and tasks, we must race against time to promote defence and military modernization. We expect peace, but we shall never give up efforts to maintain our legitimate rights, nor shall we compromise our **core interests**, no matter when or in what circumstances."

– *Xi Jinping, excerpt from his talk in a plenary meeting of the People's Liberation Army delegation at a legislative session (bold emphasis added)*(Xinhua, 2014).

**Abstract**

With China’s rise, its foreign policy has been increasingly assertive. A principal aspect of this assertiveness is to secure China’s “core interests” – a term that suggests a non-negotiable bottom line of Chinese foreign policy and has been increasingly used by the Chinese government to legitimate its diplomatic claim. Built on a previous study on how China perceives core interests, this article analyses how China aims to secure its core interests by using content analysis to study 108 Chinese academic articles concerning “China’s core interests”. It identifies six major suggestions to secure China’s core interests: military cooperation, military modernization, economic cooperation, economic influence and domestic reform. It finds that, when discussing how to secure China’s core interests, diplomacy is still the most popular solution followed by the suggestion to develop a stronger military power. This article argues that the diverse (and sometimes contrary) views on China’s national security strategy have made it difficult to predict and test the credibility of China’s peaceful rise commitment.

**Introduction**

The rise of China has prompted a sizeable literature on China’s global and regional ambition and its security implications (e.g.Johnston, 2013, Chen et al., 2013, Ross, 2006). In the pages of *International Politics*, this debate has been featured in some details (e.g. He and Feng, 2012, Yue, 2008, Zhang, 2014, Majid, 2014, Song, 2013, Etzioni, 2011, Zhang, 2012b, Jones, 2014). This article aims to turn the focus from external perceptions of China’s ambitions and actions into Chinese domestic discourses by uncovering the diverse thinking on China’s national security strategy within China. In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly used the term “core interests” to draw a non-negotiable bottom line for its foreign policy. The use of this term is considered as a strong indication of the growing assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy (Swaine, 2010). Chinese leaders are not shy in asserting their strong stances in doing whatever it takes to secure China’s core interests. As Xi Jinping elaborates in a plenary meeting of the People's Liberation Army delegation,

“In facing the new situation and tasks, we must race against time to promote defence and military modernization. We expect peace, but we shall never give up efforts to maintain our legitimate rights, nor shall we compromise our **core interests**, no matter when or in what circumstances" (bold emphasis added) (Xinhua, 2014).

As China’s core interests are non-negotiable, what those interests are has attracted much academic and public attention (e.g.Swaine, 2010, Campbell et al., 2013). Despite the increasing use by the government to legitimate its diplomatic claim, Chinese discourse of the term “core interests” is still a vague concept.

By studying 108 Chinese articles concerning China’s national core interests, my previous article with Breslin and Xiao identified how core interests are defined and what they specially are in the Chinese discourse (Zeng et al., 2015). Although China’s 2011 White Paper provides an official definition of core interests as including sovereignty claims and territorial integrity, China's political system, and socioeconomic development (China, 2011), we find that this official line is open for academic interpretation – ranging from conventional domestic affairs (e.g. Taiwan and Xinjiang), controversial territorial disputes issues (e.g. South and East China Seas), to even new expansion (e.g. energy interests in the Middle East and China’s dominance in the North-East Asia region) (Zeng et al., 2015). Chinese scholars do not only have different interpretations on what China’s core interests are but also how those interests could be best secured.

Built upon our previous study on the definition of “core interests”, this article further explores Chinese discourse with a focus on its security strategy. What strategy do Chinese scholars propose to secure those core interests? This article aims to answer this question by using content analysis to study 108 Chinese articles concerning core interests. It provides a systematic overview of national security strategy in the Chinese domestic debate and opens this Chinese domestic debate to the non-Chinese-reading audience.

When debating core interests, it is widely argued that China should use comprehensive measures including political, economic, cultural, and military solutions (e.g.Zhao, 2011). More specifically, this article identifies six major solutions including military cooperation, military modernization, economic cooperation, economic influence, diplomatic means, and domestic reform. It find that diplomacy is still the most popular (and perhaps considered as most important) solution to the debate, while to develop a stronger military power is the second most frequently mentioned strategy.

To many studies of Chinese soft power, China is committed to peaceful rise as the Chinese emphasis on soft power has the potential to ameliorate the security dilemma by reducing international fear over China’s rise. Indeed, to enhance soft power is one of most frequently mentioned strategies in the Chinese debate on core interests. Nonetheless, there is an equal emphasis in building hard power and China’s military capacity as well. More importantly, as this article will discuss, there is an attempt to redefine China’s commitment to peaceful development in order to increase China’s military strategic deterrence – this revised commitment of peaceful development might not be very peaceful. This article argues that the diverse (and sometimes contrary) views on China’s national security strategy have made it difficult to predict and test the credibility of China’s peaceful rise commitment.

**Peaceful development and securing China’s core interests**

Peaceful development is China’s official policy to assure international society that its rise will not be a threat to international peace and security.[[1]](#footnote-1) While the Chinese government claims to stick with its commitment, there is no consensus over whether China’s peaceful rise is possible. John Mearsheimer, for example, argues that a peaceful rise is unlikely as a declining US and a rising China will be engaged in security competition with considerable potential for war (Mearsheimer, 2014). It is also argued that, in many aspects, China has actually moved away from its commitment to peaceful rise (Heydarian, 2015). On the contrary, some argue that China can rise peacefully (Buzan, 2010, Buzan and Cox, 2013). For example, it is argued that the current liberal international order is capable of accommodating China’s peaceful rise (e.g.Reilly, 2012). In order to develop a more accurate understanding of China’s rise, it is also important to study Chinese domestic perceptions over its peaceful development commitment.

In recent years, the increasing use of China’s core interests is closely linked with China’s peaceful development strategy (and its revised versions). In the debate on core interests, peaceful development is a term mentioned by 45.37% articles of 108 articles that this article studied. It is argued that peaceful development fits the “fundamental interests of Chinese people” and is “effective” to secure China’s core interests (Gong, 2013:111). In Chinese discourse, the current period is a period of strategic opportunities, thus China should now concentrate on economic development. Once China grows stronger, it will be more capable of solving problems such as the current territorial disputes. Thus, at this stage, China should keep quiet and hide its real strength, instead of challenging the current peaceful and existing order. This echoes Deng Xiaoping’s “keeping a low profile” strategy.

Nonetheless, this peaceful development and “keeping a low profile” strategy has been facing serious challenges in China. Nowadays, there are growing doubts as to whether peaceful development is obsolete in China. To many Chinese, its neighbouring countries including Japan, Philippine, Vietnam have been taking advantage of China’s peaceful development strategy, while China has been tolerating their “unreasonable” territorial claims for the overall interests. It is argued that the US’ strategy of “returning to Asia” has made the situation worse and thus posed serious challenges to China’s commitment to peaceful development (Xu and Yan, 2013). These “troublesome neighbours” have been taking the US’ strategy of “returning to Asia” as an opportunity to “muddy the waters” in order to obtain more benefits when negotiating with China (e.g.Li, 2012:18). They consider China’s patience as weak and concession and thus break the relatively stable situation of “joint development and shelve disputes” (Wang and Ling, 2013:27) – this is how the Chinese narrative explains the recent tensions in South and East China Seas. Therefore, many conclude that the peaceful development strategy has no longer been conducive to protecting China’s core interests, because it restricts China from taking military actions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet it may be too costly for China to officially abandon its promise of peaceful development. In this situation, the Chinese government seems to gradually revise if not redefine its peaceful development strategy. It is argued that military actions (for the purpose of protecting legitimate core interests) will not violate China’s promises on peaceful development. In other words, China’s peaceful development does not equal of the abandonment of the use of force. Rather, the development (and perhaps the use) of force will help to maintain peace. This logic is clearly elaborated through Xi Jinping’s words, as quoted at the beginning of this article. Similarly, Wang Yi (2014), the current Chinese foreign minister, points out that,

“A stronger national defence will provide better protection for China’s core interests while also allowing China to concentrate on peaceful development.”

The above redefinition of peaceful development is considered to be crucial in protecting China’s core interests. As an article published in *Red Flag Manuscript* argues,

“To elaborate the relationship between peaceful development and China’s determination to protect core interests is crucial because the term ‘peaceful development’ is easy for some people to misinterpret – that China advocates peaceful development, and thus it does not matter even if China’s national core interests are damaged. Clearly elaborating this relationship will be conducive to warning those people that we will stick to the road of peaceful development but we will not tolerate things that harm our core interests.” (Xu and Yan, 2013)

The following sections will analyze what policy advice are made by Chinese scholars when discussing how to secure China’s core interests. It will first introduce the research methods and then discuss the findings and implication for understanding China’s (peaceful) rise.

**Methods and data**

My project with Breslin and Xiao on China’s core interests first searched articles with “core interests” (核心利益) in the title or key words from the China Academic Journals Full-text Database. We identified 108 Chinese academic journal articles concerning core interests published between 2008 and 2013. By using content analysis, we coded those 108 articles. This coding process was informed by a code manual that we developed from piloting the early versions of our coding scheme.

Our coding process comprises two stages. At the first stage, we coded how Chinese scholars define China’s core interests and reported our findings in a previous article (Zeng et al., 2015). The second stage of the research is interested in how China is going to protect those interests, which is reported in this article. While our previous article focuses on how core interests (and politics in general) are observed in China, this article studies what the Chinese government is suggested to do. The coders divide the policy recommendations of Chinese scholars into the following categories: military cooperation, military modernization, economic cooperation, economic influence, domestic reforms. Double counting is used for articles that propose more than one strategy. After discarding articles that purely focus on domestic issues and other specific technical issues, over 85% articles are seen to fit into these categories. Figure 1 reports our coding result.

The transparency of empirical security studies has become increasingly important (Bennett et al., 2014, Moravcsik, 2014, Saunders, 2014, Kapiszewski and Kirilova, 2014, Snyder, 2014). Security studies, like other social science research, would benefit from being more transparent and replicable. In order to meet the emerging transparency and replication standards, all data including our coding manual, codebook, online-appendix and other replication materials are available at my research page.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notably, we should not take the frequency of solutions as it is because the topic of the articles will certainly affect the authors’ suggestions. For example, articles about Sino-US relations will certainly recommend diplomacy as a policy option. Nonetheless, the frequency still provides us with a rough idea of policies that China is discussing.

In addition, there is a difference between China’s core interests and its more broad national interests. The suggested national security strategy in the debate not only focuses on securing core interests, but also China’s national interests more broadly. Because of the nature of our data, we are unable to completely distinguish policies to defend core interests and non-core interests. However, this difference does not undermine the implication of this study given that it is all about China’s national security strategy. Indeed, there is no clear line between core interests and national interests in Chinese discussion. The Chinese debate on core interests evolves from China's conceptualizations of “national interests”. Originally, it was a taboo to discuss “national interests” because of the dogmatic Marxist ideology. Since 1990s, Chinese international relations community has embraced the notion of "national interests" more openly. For example, Yan Xuetong’s 1996 book *Analysis of China’s National Interests* triggered a series of debate on Chinese foreign policy and national interests (Zhang, 2011:19). The discussion of "core interests" occurs in the context of rethinking China's national interests.

Moreover, this article does not claim that the academic debate on national security strategy will be directly translated into Chinese foreign policy. However, it has significant policy implications. First of all, the debate is heavily influenced and participated by Chinese policy community. Over a third of those 108 articles in the debate are contributed by China’s state-affiliated think tanks and senior officials, including Ma Zhengang (former Chinese Ambassador to the UK), Mei Zhaorong (former Ambassador to Germany) and Shen Guofang (former Assistant Foreign Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative of China to the UN).

Second, the academic debate provides us with a broad idea of how Chinese scholars are thinking about how to secure core interests. Chinese academic writings on international relations are also much related to policy. In many cases, policy recommendation rather than academic theory is the principal purpose of Chinese academic writing. This kind of writing style is called a “challenge-response” mode (Zhu and Pearson, 2013). In this mode, the author usually describes a problem first, and then suggests a solution to solve this problem. In the debate on core interests, many articles started with a problem, such as how China’s core interests are harmed by the US, and this was followed by a set of policy suggestions on what China should do. This writing pattern provides us solid empirical ground to uncover diverse views of China’s national security strategy.

At the very least, the academic debate presents the view of an elite group (Chinese scholars) that will influence, and could not be simply ignored by the Chinese government. As such, the Chinese academic debate provides an imperfect but important angle for us to uncover different thinking on Chinese foreign policy within China.

Figure 1: Major Solutions to Defend China’s National (Core) Interests in the Chinese Debate (2008-2013)

**Diplomatic Means**

As Figure 1 shows, diplomatic means are the most frequently mentioned (but not necessarily the most efficient) solution in the debate. Over half (55.5%) of the articles argue that China should use diplomatic means to secure its interests. Diplomacy is also considered by some as the “most important” solution (Zhang, 2011:20-21). This section will discuss the main theme within diplomatic means.

*International order and China’s international responsibility*

In the debate, some argue that China should actively engage in the existing international system although it has many unreasonable factors. It is argued that China should improve the existing international system instead of “blindly against it” because the latter way is not conducive to China’s security interests and development (Qi, 2011:100).

In addition to participating in the exiting order, it is argued that China should create something new. For example, some argue that China should promote reforms within the exiting international economic system and establish new international economic systems in order to provide system security for China’s economic gain from globalization (Su, 2011:41). An article considers the 2008 financial crisis as an opportunity for China “to undermine IMF, break American monopoly, and use its increasing economic power to establish international agency led by China” (Li et al., 2010:22). The similar idea was translated into action by the Chinese government three years later, when China initiated to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – a China-led bank that is widely considered as a potential competitor of IMF and World Bank.

While some state that the international society should not have unduly high expectations in terms of a developing country like China, there are also internal reviews of China’s conduct. China is suggested to act more “confident” and avoiding being “too aggressive” and China should take more international responsibilities in order to become an important participant of international society and a “real convincing emerging power” (Li, 2011:106). The vice dean of Shanghai Chinese Academy Social Science (CASS), Huang Renwei, argues that China could provide more public goods to the international system. China can, for example, invest a large amount of money into World Bank or IMF, or establish a new international currency (Zhang, 2012a:48).

Some also note that China’s goal to take more international responsibility and establish new institutions will not replace American hegemony. Thus, it is not for cultivating China’s “own sphere of influence” but for “building interests of the chain and mechanisms for dialogue, consultation, and cooperation” (Zhang, 2013b:55).

*Respecting core interests of the US and Russia*

Although 14.81% of 108 articles that I studied see the US as damaging China’s core interests, we also find that 15.7% of articles appeal to China to respect and avoid challenging American core interests. For example, Huang Renwei argues that there are several lessons that China can learn from the peaceful hegemonic transition from Britain to the US:

“First, China should try its best to avoid becoming America’s No .1 imaginary enemy and confronting comprehensively with the US. …. Second, China should try its best to avoid challenging American core interests especially the most important one i.e. American dominance of its alliance system and control over international strategic passage. Third, China should try its best to increase US dependence on China including its commodity and funding dependence.” (Huang, 2012:127)

Indeed, the peaceful power transition between Britain and the US does not only attract enormous interests in China but also in the West. Buzan and Cox(2013), for example, also compare peaceful rise of China with that of the US. They argue that China is more likely to rise peacefully than the US was. However, a completely contrary conclusion is made in China. It is widely believed that culture heterogeneity between China and the US has made China’s peaceful rise much more difficult than the US’(Feng, 2005, Yan, 2013).

Returning to the issue of respecting the US’ core interests, not all articles agree with Huang that China should avoid challenging the US. For example, some do not accept the American control over international strategic passage. It is argued that the international strategic passage “involves” China’s core interests because it relates to international trade, security and sovereignty (Li and Li, 2011:108; 109). Thus, China should prepare a battle to break the First Island Chain, in order to “recover Taiwan and to protect Chinese islands, resources, and offshore transport routes” (Li and Li, 2011:112).

While the American image is mixed in the debate, that of Russia is almost purely positive in the debate(Zeng et al., 2015). Some argue that China and Russia could “combine” their core interests as a basis for cooperation (Tian, 2010:39). For example, Russia supports China’s core interests, such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan, in return for Chinese support on the Russia’s position in North Caucasus.

*Diplomatic compromise*

Compromise and negotiation is obviously the core of diplomacy. 14.8% articles argue that China should avoid conflicts with other countries. It is argued that diplomacy can end territorial disputes (e.g.Zhang, 2013b:55, Zhang, 2013a). For example, a CASS researcher argues that “we should try our best to avoid confrontation and to expand our strategic space and further develop a favorable internal and external environment. This is the position of our national core interests. In terms of territory, I think we should analyze specific cases and treat them differently. In past border negotiations, we basically solved them by using the principle of mutual compromise and reciprocity. Now, the only undecided land border is with India and Bhutan, and this will definitely be solved by mutual compromise and reciprocity in the future” (Zhang, 2013b:55).

Diplomatic compromise also involves strategy and calculations. 10.18% articles argue that China should compromise on non-core interest issues. It is argued that these compromises will help to maintain China’s capability to protect core interests and thus maximize its overall interests (Wang, 2011:71). As long as core interests are secured, compromise is not considered as “weak” or “humiliating”; instead, it is a reflection of “wisdom” (Zhang and Li, 2008:47). Of course, this compromise on non-core interests contrasts with persistence on core interests. As some summarize, when dealing with Sino-US relations, China should “actively” strive for achievement and “never compromise” on core interests, but keep a low profile and “moderately cooperate” in other issues (Jing, 2012a:62).

*Soft power*

Soft power is also highly valued when debating core interests. 15.7% of articles in the debate note that China should strengthen its soft power. Notably, the audience of Chinese soft power is both international and domestic societies. In this regard, soft power is not only considered as a way to undermine fear over China’s rise internationally but also to enhancing regime legitimacy and national cohesion domestically (Edney, 2015).

As Liang Yunxiang, a professor at Peking University, argues “in addition to hard power, it is more important for China to enhance soft power i.e. attractiveness (instead of senses of fear and threat) towards both the domestic and international societies. This is also an essential way to protect China’s core interests” (Liang, 2012). The kind of views echoes the emphasis of Chinese leaders on soft power and closely links with China’s policy agenda in terms of enhancing China’s national image at the international stage.

Some argue that soft power is a significant factor for the US to replace British hegemony and thus, China should increase soft power by promoting Chinese culture and talents (Huang, 2012:127). Others consider taking more international and regional responsibilities and providing more public goods, which are essential in enhancing China’s national image and thus soft power (Wang, 2011:72). For example, one article specifically focuses on how the armed police participating in international rescue can help to enhance soft power and transparency (Wang and Pu, 2012). A few suggest that the use of soft power should take precedence over hard power, for example, when implementing China’s Middle East strategy (Niu, 2013:68).

While some urge the American government to control their own public opinions, a few articles argue that instead of passively being affected by American domestic politics, China should take the initiative to play a *bigger* role in influencing American domestic politics. As one article points out

“Currently, Chinese academia and political circles have already recognized the importance of American congress in affecting American China policy, and gradually started public relations work in order to capitalize on the trend and avoid the unnecessary trouble. We should further study the significant impact of American domestic political factors on the Sino-US relations, analyse its current and future development direction, and find out American strategic intentions on China in order to be prepared. On the other hand, we could use the diversity and openness of American politics to exert our influence. We should strengthen the efforts in building public diplomacy, actively guide American public opinion, and establish a positive national image” (Zhang and Chen, 2009:8).

The financial crisis in particular is considered to be an excellent opportunity for China to get involved. For example, some financial researchers argue that China could use the influence of American domestic public opinion and international society to “dismember” US credit rating agencies, and thus obtaining China’s core interests (Li et al., 2010:21-22). Even if this strategy is unsuccessful, the power of international society would help to isolate the US to some extent.

Above all, the solution of diplomacy is still committed to China’s peaceful development. To some extent, the mainstream Chinese view considers peaceful development as a guiding principle to construct China’s national security strategy. Nonetheless, diplomacy does not necessarily equal to cooperation or compromise and thus non-aggressive/assertive foreign policy – in the Chinese context, it can be “diplomatic struggles” (外交斗争).

**Military Modernization**

The second most frequently mentioned strategy is to develop China’s military power (13.8%). In the Chinese context, the development of military power is often termed as military modernization. It is argued that the modernization of national defense is required to secure China’s core interests (Gong, 2013). This echoes the aforementioned Xi Jinping’s assertion that China should increase its military strength and never compromise on the issue of core interests “no matter when and in what circumstances”. Given that Xi’s discourse was made at the People’s Liberation Army delegation, it sent an explicit message that Chinese army should play a larger role in securing China’s core interests (at least by military deterrence).

In the debate, most proponents of this solution suggest the development of military power for the purposes of ***strategic deterrence*** rather than to prepare for real military battles. In the other words, they focus on military capacity instead of willing to use military power. It is argued that a strong army can promote peace by deterring potential enemies –a dialectical logic that we will return shortly. However, this argument is potentially flawed, in that a military deterrent is not convincing without deploying whatever military capacity China has. Thus, a military deterrent will be less effective without the willingness to use the military force.

Many also note that China should be cautious in using military power (Zhang, 2013a, Zhu, 2012, Zhou, 2013). For example, an associate professor of the National Defense University, Zhao Yi, argues that the view – that military action is the only solution when core interests are damaged – is “oversimplified” (Zhao 2011:65). It is argued that “as China’s core interests are always intertwined with other countries’ interests, to protect these two interests do not necessarily lead to conflicts” and thus, China should use various means instead of solely relying on military power to protect China’s core interests. The cautious view on using military power is endorsed by some of interviewees that I met in Beijing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Similarly, Zhang Tuosheng, a Director of China Foundation for International Strategic Studies, argues that the White Paper’s definition of China’s core interests is not to draw a red line and China should treat its core interests differently. Zhang suggests that military solution only applies for “domestic affairs” such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang; when it comes to other territorial disputes, “China has always insisted never use force, but peaceful dialogues to solve conflicts” (Zhang, 2011:21). In this sense, China should find a peaceful way to manage the disputes in South and East China seas.

Unlike the above view, some argue that China should prepare for possible military battles in South and East China Seas and Taiwan (Li, 2012, Jiang, 2012). For example, Li Zhongjie, a deputy director of the Party History Research Center, and Li Bing, a deputy director in the Chinese Communist Party’s Department of Organization, argue that China should prepare to recapture Taiwan and project offshore transport lines through military actions (Li and Li, 2011:112).

While the above suggestions focus on enhancing military capacity and preparation for the purpose of strategic deterrence, a few articles go a step further. For example, a Japan expert in the CASS argues that “China should not be afraid of using military power to recover Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands… China should immediately develop its maritime and air military striking force and develop several sets of operational plans” – although he considers peaceful means to be the ***best*** solution to solve this dispute (Jiang, 2012:46). Similarly, another article implicitly encourages China to “dare to fight” also for the purpose of peace (Zhang et al., 2013:39). The logic of these articles is based on the Chinese dialectics of peace and war, which is closely related to Chinese discourse on peaceful development. In the debate, building a strong Chinese army is not mutually exclusive with China’s commitment to peaceful development. On the contrary, military strength is widely considered as a “necessary condition” for China’s peaceful development (Gong, 2013:111). This kind of argument refers back to China’s official discourse on peaceful development, by which China promises to develop peacefully, but reserves the rights to take military actions as a last resort, as discussed above.

Moreover, to some Chinese scholars, “peaceful solutions” include some semi-military actions that may potentially lead to a large scale war. As a CASS scholar argues

“We have to note that except Chinese navy’s direct military confrontation with Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force, all other solutions lie in the field of peaceful solutions, including direct confrontation between Chinese marine police, marine surveillance, and fisheries administration and Japan Coast Guard. Thus, China should, of course, immediately develop its marine police, marine surveillance, and fisheries administration” (Jiang, 2012:13).

In short, within the category of military modernization, China is suggested to develop a stronger army either for deterring others or preparing for a real battle. Among all suggested national security strategies, this is perhaps the one that moves farthest away from China’s peaceful development commitment.

**Military cooperation**

Compared with military modernization, military cooperation is another (but not necessarily opposite) way of using military power. Military cooperation generally refers to the idea that Chinese army should have more cooperation with foreign countries the US in particular. More specifically, it is related with joint military exercises, military transparency, and military security dialogue among others. While military modernization is more related to the use of force and confrontation, this solution is primarily for communication and understanding. Notably, military cooperation is not *completely* contradictory to military modernization. As Zhu Feng elaborates,

“the more China wants to strengthen its military modernization and to achieve the dream of strengthening the army and enriching the state, the more we need to actively conduct external military exchange and cooperation and the more we should make an effort to participate in military diplomacy” (Zhu, 2010:15).

The opaque nature of Chinese military development (especially real expenditure and intentions) has long been criticized by the international society especially the US and it is a key factor to undermine Sino-US mutual trust in the military fields. In the debate, some blame the weak Sino-US military mutual trust on the US. For example, a professor in National Defence University argues that there are three major barriers to establish Sino-US military mutual trust(Xu, 2010:24-28). First, while the Chinese position on Sino-US relations is clear and continuous, the American position is not clear and consistent, because its policy swings between containment and engagement. Second, China wishes to clearly define the basic principles of military exchange before discussing specific issues. However, the US prefers to start by discussing specific issues (for the purpose of conducting exchanges and increasing transparency), and then to gradually establish strategic mutual trust. Third, the bilateral relation is not equal, because the US has been continuously damaging China’s core interests (especially Taiwan issue).

Some are also critical of American scepticism of the development of the Chinese army. For example, one article argues that “some American fully doubts on China’s future development and have strong bias on China’s reasonable defence needs. They attempt to contain China, and thus often use problems such as ‘military transparency’ and ‘reciprocity’ to put pressure on China” (Gao, 2010:33). They also justify China’s increasing military expenditure. As a professor in the Central Party School argues, “China’s national defence budget has increased with the growth of Chinese economy. However, China’s defence spending per capita and military personnel per capita are still lower than the average of some major powers. Thus, China’s defence spending is reasonably moderate and transparent. It is consistent with the needs of protecting national core interests and will not threaten other countries”(Gong, 2013:111).

While the above views consider the US as completely unreasonable, some argue that the Chinese army is also in the wrong (at least fail to communicate effectively). As Zhu Feng argues,

“an army of a major power in 21st century should first be able to conduct international exchanges and have communication skills. What we are doing now is that we have already started to ‘speak strong words’ when our strength is not strong. This actually is ‘foolhardy’.” (Zhu, 2010:15)

While realizing the US’ “ulterior motives”, some are still positive to the idea of military transparency. For example, some argue that although the US might find out the real strength of Chinese army, it is still worth increasing China’s military transparency as this is not only helpful to China’s military reform but also conducive to Sino-US military mutual trust (Niu and Xu, 2010:16).

It is argued that there is a great deal of room for US and China to enhance mutual trust in military areas because of (1) their shared international interests such as anti-terrorism and nuclear proliferation and (2) China’s willing to improve its international images, as we will discuss in the section of soft power (Li, 2011:106). Overall, we find that 9.2% articles are positive to the broad idea of military cooperation.

In short, military modernization and cooperation are two primary strands of literature on the role of Chinese army in securing China’s interests. Military cooperation is clearly proposed as a means of gaining greater international understanding. It might be contradictory and exclusive with military modernization when the latter is for the purpose of strategic deterrence – i.e. creating a sense of fear that might be offset by the effects of military cooperation. However, when the military development itself is the end, the development of Chinese army could gain more international understanding by promoting military cooperation.

It is also important to note that military cooperation can be overlapped with diplomacy. In the debate, many frequently term military cooperation (e.g. joint military exercises) as “military diplomacy” (Liang and Ren, 2013, Zhu, 2010). Given the ultimate goal is to become more responsible and undermine international fear, the suggestion of military cooperation indicates strong commitment to peaceful rise.

**Economic Powers**

Compared with military power, China’s economic power may be more powerful, given its status as the second largest world economy. 11.1% articles argue that China should have more economic cooperation with foreign countries. Although it is realized that economic cooperation alone is not omnipotent, some still believe that it will help to reduce the current security tensions. For example, one article argues that “economic cooperation is not sufficient condition to solve territorial disputes but it will be helpful to reduce the risk of armed conflict and thus establish China’s status as a regional power” (Li, 2012:18). This view echoes the liberal theory that the likelihood of war will be decreased as a result of economic interdependence – though without engaging with the literature on the theme written in English. In this regard, the starting point of this suggestion sticks to China’s peaceful development.

Furthermore, 4.6% articles implicitly and explicitly mentioned the use of economic influence as a powerful weapon to protect China’s core interests. For example, as Xiao Xi considers dominance in Northeast Asia as a core interest of China, it is argued that China should use “economic advantages” to achieve this dominance. Specifically, Xiao suggests that China should use a free trade agreement as a breakthrough to establish a Northeast Asian free trade zone, in order to provide institutional protection of its dominance in this region (Xiao, 2011:79).

In addition, several articles argue that China should increase America's dependence on China in the aspects of not only economy and but also security (Zhang, 2012a:48, Huang, 2012) – even if the author notes the criticism within China that China should not keep so many dollar reserves (Zhang, 2012a:48). However, it is important to mention that the use of economic power as a weapon may lead to a backfire in today’s globalized world. In late 2014, Xi Jinping (2014) clearly recognized the fact that China has been ever more dependent on the rest of world. If China overplays its economic influence, this may harm its own interests because of the high level of interdependence.

Not surprisingly, we also find that a few articles suggest that China should get rid of its economic dependence on the US in order to better protect China’s core interests (Chu and Ying, 2012:27, Chu and Fang, 2010). For example, an article argues that “in a globalized world, interdependence is desirable, positive, and inevitable. However, if one side depends excessively on the other side is not interdependence but attachment. As a result, the one who depends more will be put in an unfavourable and passive position” (Chu and Ying, 2012:27, Chu and Fang, 2010). Thus, if China can reduce its dependence on the American market, China will be in a better position to deal with the Sino-US relations and thus be more capable of protecting its core interests when the American government harms China (Chu and Ying, 2012). This kind of view contrasts with the positive attitude to Sino-US economic exchanges, as it may help to undermine US-China confrontation.

It also reflects Chinese concern over its dependence with the rest of the world. Indeed, the 2008 financial crises increased the concern of Chinese leadership with the danger of being too dependent on exports, foreign markets, and foreign investment for growth. This fear of dependence is not new, as it was widely debated after the 1997 Asian financial crisis too as evidenced by the rise of economic security discourse in the Chinese academic literature (Yeung, 2008). So, the desirable goal is perhaps to reduce China’s sensitivity and vulnerability in its economic relations with other countries while increase these of China’s economic partners.

**Domestic reforms**

In addition to the above strategies, the debate also presents a variety of policy suggestions that urge the government to promote domestic reforms. Patriotic education has always been a significant ruling strategy to win domestic support in China. In the debate, 7.4% articles argue that China should promote patriotism. Almost all articles published on education journals closely link core interests with patriotic education(Cui, 2010:128). It is argued that core interests should be considered as “the first priority” of patriotic education (Wang, 2012:47). This domestic promotion of patriotism may have an external impact by leading to the rise of Chinese nationalism (and thus a more assertive foreign policy).

A more important domestic concern is to maintain the political legitimacy of the Chinese government – arguably, this is the most crucial task of the Communist Party in contemporary China(Zeng, 2015). When political legitimacy is concerned, some pro-democratic and liberal policies are suggested. For example, a researcher based in CASS argues that China should “guide instead of control public opinion. It should use political democracy to replace authoritarian politics and place more emphasis on ‘universality’ and less focus on ‘exceptionalism’” (Wang, 2011:71). A researcher based in the Central Party School argues that China should strengthen its communication with the US on the issue of democracy, and that China should decide on the process of democratization, according to China’s realistic needs (Liu, 2010:53).

Nonetheless, the discussion of core interests may not all lead to the above pro-liberal views. Those articles that consider socialist ideology as core interests are strongly against those pro-liberal values. Some argue that the infiltration of Western political values has seriously threatened China’s socialist ideology and political system, and thus China’s core interests. Thus, China “must emphasize the struggle for values in order to prevent national core interests from being violated” (Chen and Zhou, 2012:142). This reflects the domestic concern that regime security is under the threat of ideological challenges from the West.

Some suggest that China should conduct more research on the relevant issues and improve its institution-building and legislation. For example, an article argues that China should formulate and implement “China’s core interests maintenance law” in order to provide legal protection for China’s actions to protect core interests (Yu, 2011:45).

Although the above suggestions are about domestic reforms, they may have crucial implications for other countries. For example, a researcher in Shanghai CASS argues that China should set three strategic goals for its marine development strategy (Jing, 2012b:13). The short term goal (2012-2020) is to stabilize China’s marine. More specifically, China should improve its marine institution-building and relevant laws. The mid-term goal (2021-2040) is to use China’s comprehensive national strength to “solve certain marine issues (such as South China Sea) and thus achieve the goal of regional maritime power.” The long term goal (2041-2050) is that China should be able to “manage 300 square kilometre marine without any barrier.” This kind of domestic-focused policy recommendation will certainly have an external impact once it has been adopted.

**Concluding remarks: can China rise peacefully?**

Using the similar method to study 83 Chinese academic articles, Zhang Biwu’s study analyses Chinese perceptions of US return to Southeast Asia (Zhang, 2015). According to Zhang, Chinese scholars would focus on hard power “if China is not committed to peace rise” and focus on soft power “if China is committed to peace rise”. As all indicators show that China is committed to peaceful rise, Zhang concluded that “Chinese scholars have internalized the strategy of peaceful development”. While Zhang’s work indicates a clear cut between whether China is committed to peaceful rise or not, my findings suggest a much more complicated and muddy picture of Chinese perceptions. On the one hand, Chinese scholars do focus on soft power-building and diplomatic means is the most frequently mentioned solution. As noted above, some Chinese scholars consider soft power to be more important and effective than hard power and argue that diplomatic means take precedence over all other solutions.

On the other hand, there are considerable interests in hard power in the Chinese discourse. Although more focus is on the development of Chinese military capability instead of willing to use forces, this capability can be transferred into real action immediately and the low willing of using military forces may be changed very quickly – for example, driven by the rising domestic nationalism. China is also not shy to use other hard powers, such as economic influence. In this regard, this muddy, diverse Chinese views have made China’s foreign policy difficult to predict.

Moreover, diverse views in China have provided a rich source of Chinese perceptions to support some pre-existing views. This is partly because of the limited sources that are available for non-Chinese-reading audience. My project aims to present a systematic review of the Chinese perspective – even if it is nationalistic self-understanding and “inaccurate” – and to strengthen a basic understanding of domestic diversity within China (Zeng, 2016, Zeng et al., 2015, Zeng and Breslin, 2015). Appreciate such a diversity is vital to develop a better understanding of Chinese foreign policy and its internal dynamics.

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1. The original term is “peaceful rise”. As people tend to focus on “rise” instead of peace, the Chinese official discourses replaced “rise” with “development”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, cited from ZHOU, F. 2013. 中国外交软与硬的标准是什么 (What Standards of China's Diplomacy are Soft and Hard?). *人民论坛 (People's Forum),* 4**,** 56-57. , ZHU, F. 2012. 维护核心利益亟待外交"大战略" (To Protect China's Core Interests Needs Grand Strategy). *人民论坛 (People's Forum),* S1**,** 30-31. Similarly, some argue that the grand strategy of “keeping a low profile” is not conducive to protect China’s core interests. For example, see GUO, C. 2013. 美战略重心东移后的中国周边安全环境 (China's peripheral security after the US conducted the eastward shift of its strategic center of gravity). *现代国际关系 (Contemporary International Relations),* 10**,** 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://sites.google.com/site/zengjinghan/data> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The interviews were conducted in April 2015 and May 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)