

CONFERENCE REPORT

16th INFORMAL ROUNDTABLE ON CHINA

China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping Perspectives and perceptions from Europe and neighbouring countries

Tuesday, 12th November 2013, 12:30h to 14:30h
European Parliament, Altiero Spinelli Building, Room A3G-2

hosted by

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China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping: Perspectives and perceptions from Europe and neighbouring countries

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Introduction

The informal roundtable on China has become an institution for the promotion of awareness and dialogue on Chinese domestic and foreign issues. In its 16th edition, the event discussed the perspectives and perceptions from Europe and Chinese neighboring countries about China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping. On 15 November 2012 Mr. Xi was elected the new General Secretary of the Party by the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. His foreign policy has been often characterized as more assertive than the one implemented by his predecessor but this is not a position shared by all political analysts. The present report will summarize the key issues discussed in the event: the priorities of the Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping; the bilateral relationship with the European Union; and the perceptions from neighboring countries.

Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping

The Chinese foreign policy is related to a development project which is dependent on the sustainability of economic growth and trade. By looking at the documents disclosed by the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in 2012, some new priorities in the Chinese Foreign Policy can be observed: to strengthen the relations with other international players and with the international community; to transform the neighboring countries in a priority area of influence and to provide this neighborhood with more concrete benefits from its relationship with China; and to try to overcome the tensions in the relationship with the United States and promote deeper cooperation with this country.

China's awareness of its great-power status is growing and in fact the Chinese leadership is trying to develop new foreign policy strategies to match the responsibilities associated with this growing power. However, that does not mean necessarily that China is becoming more assertive. It must be taken into consideration that there are many voices in the contemporary Chinese political scene. Chinese realists focus on strategic reasoning and the search for prestige, and in this context claim that China should balance the US and build up its army. Great-power scholars argue

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that China should focus on the relationship with the US, Russia and other powerful actors in the system and sustain its new status in this selected group. Chinese Nativists advocate that China should regain its past glory and in this context should reclaim the sovereignty of Taiwan by any means. Members of the New Left on the other hand are extremely suspicious of globalization and of China getting more involved in global capitalism and defend a cautious and more isolationist posture. These groups are currently disputing power in the country and it is not clear who will come out victorious. In addition, Chinese foreign policy actors have been growing in number. Although it might seem otherwise, China does not have a monolithic government. Local authorities have a significant amount of independence and power. Concerning foreign policy issues, the central government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs compete with military and local authorities. Many disputes that are often portrayed as evidence of a new assertiveness of the central government, like cases related to fishery and trespassing of maritime borders, are not under control of the central government, but are initiated through decisions taken by local authorities or military fleet commanders.

Hence, it is far too early to argue that the Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping is becoming systematically more assertive. What is certainly clear is that it is becoming more complex and that the Chinese government should make an effort to make it more transparent.

The relationship with the European Union

There is a shared feeling that the relationship between China and the EU has been cooling down. On the one hand the comprehensive strategic partnership is being developed further. The parties maintain more than fifty bilateral sectoral dialogues. On the other hand there is a European perception that China is not looking at the European Union as a priority partner any more. Mr. Xi has already visited 14 countries but has not made any official visit to the EU.

Democracy and human rights are still a major source of disagreements between the parties. Despite the existence of a Human Rights Dialogue since 1995, European and Chinese leaders do not share the same understanding of this concept. Chinese leaders claim that the EU should respect these conceptual differences, focusing on building mutual trust and developing further a partnership based on equality. European public opinion does not completely agree with these terms though.

Another obstacle in the relationship has been the lack of a common position on issues of the global international agenda. From the debates regarding the limitation of emissions of greenhouse gases to the discussions about the adequate reaction of the international community in face of the civil war in Syria, there is a great number of issues in which the EU and China cannot reach an agreement.

Despite these problems EU-China relations have not reached the point of stagnation. Both sides need to find a common ground and overcome their differences to fully exploit the benefits of bilateral cooperation.

Perceptions from Chinese neighboring countries

The Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping cannot be generally defined as assertive, but there have been particular contexts in which the Chinese central government has been raising its voice. Territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas have been creating a tense atmosphere in the region. In addition, an evident worsening of relations with Japan and South Korea can be noted since China decided in November to establish an air defense zone which includes territory disputed by many parties in the region.

Concerning relations with India, there is no perception that relations have changed since Xi Jinping became the new Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party and later on head of state of the country. Border problems are still unresolved and China's growing economic presence in the countries of the region, associated with Chinese support of Pakistan's military, sustains a perception of mistrust from the Indian government. On the other hand the plans to develop the 'southern silk road' – an economic corridor that passes through Myanmar and Bangladesh to connect Kunming (China) to Kolkata (India) – show that there are possibilities of enhancing economic relations and easing the overall mistrust that currently characterizes the bilateral relationship.

Conclusions

Much has been said about a change of orientation in Chinese foreign policy with Xi Jinping. It has been argued that China is ready to adopt a much more assertive foreign policy to consolidate its special status and advocate more starkly its interests in the international arena. However, that could not be completely confirmed up to now. China has in fact been raising its rhetoric on some issues – e.g. the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas – but that does not mean that a complete foreign policy reformulation has been taking place, which would eventually lead to more confrontations. China's neighbors are certainly paying due attention to the next movements from the central government, but in some countries the perceptions are not necessarily more negative since Xi Jinping assumed a leadership position.

Concerning EU-China relations, the main problems remain associated with different political systems and disagreements on human rights issues. After the development of a good relationship with Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao it is evident that European leaders feel neglected by the new Chinese leadership and the lack of emphasis on the comprehensive

strategic partnership. However, relations are not stagnating. EU-China relations are still one of the most developed strategic partnerships between the EU and other global players. The parties may use the next bilateral summit to discuss how to give a renewed political impulse to a relationship which is institutionally very well developed.