

Securing China's core interests: the state of the debate in China

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The extent to which a rising China's core interests may, or will, 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 1993.¹ Indeed, the debate has been featured in some detail in the pages of this journal.² Primarily focusing on China's challenge to US interests in East Asia (rather than on the global scale), the attempt to identify when China might be able to achieve regional 'primacy, supremacy, or hegemony' remains 'the name of the international politics game in Asia'.³ While this interest in China's rise did not exactly need to be given a renewed impetus, the question of whether a new period of increased assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy had opened in 2009 (or thereabouts) brought a new dimension to the debates.⁴ In this context, disagreement has centred on, first, what it means or takes to be considered '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.⁵

¹ Aaron Friedberg, 'Ripe for rivalry: prospects for peace in a multipolar Asia', *International Security* 18: 3, 1993–4, pp. 5–33.

² See e.g. Brantly Womack, 'Beyond win–win: rethinking China's international relationships in an era of economic uncertainty', *International Affairs* 89: 4, July 2013, pp. 911–28; Ian Clark, 'China and the United States: a succession of hegemonies?', *International Affairs* 87: 1, Jan. 2011, pp. 13–28; Rosemary Foot, 'Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging', *International Affairs* 82: 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 77–94; Shaun Breslin, 'China and the global order: signalling threat or friendship?', *International Affairs* 89: 3, May 2013, pp. 615–34; Amitai Etzioni, 'Is China a responsible stakeholder?', *International Affairs* 87: 3, May 2011, pp. 539–53.

³ Yuen Foong Khong, 'Primacy or world order? The United States and China's rise: a review essay', *International Security* 38: 3, Winter 2013–14, p. 154.

⁴ See Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How new and assertive is China's new assertiveness?', *International Security* 37: 4, Autumn 2013, pp. 7–48; Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Debating China's assertiveness', *International Security* 38: 3, Winter 2013–14, pp. 176–83.

⁵ '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], Jan. 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-01/29/c_114538253.htm, accessed 1 Feb. 2015.

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.’⁶

So, if compromise on core interests is ruled out, it would make sense to identify what these interests are in order to better understand China’s international security strategies and even possibly to predict what they might entail in the future.

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 from which to start.⁷ 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’.⁸ Yet when it comes to specifics, the boundaries of core interests remain somewhat blurred and open to question. This fuzziness may 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 domestic criticism that it is not acting forcefully enough.⁹

We do not claim to provide in this article a clear, definitive and enduring understanding of what China’s core interests actually are. On the contrary, the article will in fact 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, and on 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 and qualitative analysis to study 108 articles written by Chinese scholars (in Chinese) that deal with the concept of China’s core interests. We do not claim, either, 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 ‘sinicized’—to be given a specific meaning and understanding that work in (and arguably *for*) the Chinese political context. An example here might be the evolution

⁶ Shi Yinhong, ‘How to boost China’s peaceful rise’, *China Daily*, 18 May 2010.

⁷ Michael Swaine, ‘China’s assertive behavior, part one: on “core interests”’, *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 34, 2010, pp. 1–25.

⁸ *White Paper on China’s peaceful development* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, Sept. 2011).

⁹ Caitlin Campbell, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu and Craig Murray, *China’s ‘core interests’ and the East China Sea*, US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2013, <http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Core%20Interests%20and%20the%20East%20China%20Sea.pdf>, accessed 2 Feb. 2015.

of thinking over the nature of Chinese soft power (and how to utilize it). Domestically, when new concepts are put forward (often by China's leaders), they are not always clearly defined; frequently, the process of filling the concept with real meaning occurs subsequently and incrementally—as, for example, with the concept of 'the China dream'. This process, we argue, is also part of 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, the concept of 'China's core interests' remains a rather vague one. With different voices from within China using different definitions, the boundaries between core and non-core interests are both movable 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 from which to select to help support pre-existing views on the nature of China as a global power.

Researching China's core interests

Our intention in this article to uncover different thinking on (and definitions of) core interests suggests a prior understanding that there is a considerable degree of pluralism in Chinese thinking. This is not to say that each of these different opinions carries the same political weight; clearly what China's top leaders say and do has more significance than a short article in a specialist academic journal. And, as we shall show, in the case of core interests as in other areas, the promotion of an idea by a political leader can often act as the starting point for subsequent academic discussion. Nevertheless, we think it is important to broaden the focus beyond the political leadership, 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.¹⁰ Second, different voices coming from China can and do elicit different external responses that in turn have their own impacts on Chinese discourse and policy. Indeed, one of our key findings here is a concern among Chinese 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'¹¹ by presenting minority views as if they were mainstream expressions of China's grand strategy. There are echoes here 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 they can marshal to show that China is a threat to the global order and thereby justify mobilizing alliances to try to prevent (or at least manage) China's rise.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, *Stirring up the South China Sea (I)*, Asia Report no. 223 (Beijing and Brussels, 2012).

¹¹ Liu Jianfei, 'Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi' [Reflections on China's diplomacy in recent years], *Xueshu zhengming* [Academic contention], no. 4, 2012, p. 44.

This fragmentation and pluralism result in part from the opportunities that new political agendas provide for domestic actors. As Wang Yizhou points out in an interview with Zhang Diyu, there is an incentive for agencies to define their own interests as being ‘core’ in the hope that doing so will attract 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.¹² 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 consistent 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 where 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 in 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. There is direct evidence of this: soon after a previous article on legitimacy was published,¹³ a central body of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) asked for a summary report of it for internal use.¹⁴

Research methods: quantitative content analysis plus interviews

This study builds on previous uses of content analysis to study Chinese academic discourses.¹⁵ Having first identified 108 Chinese academic articles concerning China’s core interests published between 2008 and 2013 from the China Academic Journals Full-text Database,¹⁶ 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 from our intercoding reliability assessment. Our intercoding reliability (the level of agreement between the two coders) reached over 92 per cent. We start from an assumption that coding can give only an indication of key themes and cannot itself provide a full explanation. Accordingly, this study was

¹² Zhang Diyu, ‘Zhongguo “hexinliyi” zhi bian’ [The debate on China’s ‘core interests’], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 19, 2011, p. 20.

¹³ Zeng Jinghan, ‘The debate on regime legitimacy in China: bridging the wide gulf between western and Chinese scholarship’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23: 88, 2014, pp. 612–35.

¹⁴ Zeng Jinghan, ‘Zhong xifang hefaxing yanjiu dongtai’ [Chinese and western studies on political legitimacy], government report for the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CCP, Beijing, 2014.

¹⁵ e.g. Zeng, ‘The debate on regime legitimacy in China’; Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, ‘The debate on party legitimacy in China: a mixed quantitative/qualitative analysis’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 18: 59, 2009, pp. 339–58; Amy King, ‘Where does Japan fit in China’s “new type of great power relations”?’’, *Asian Forum* 2: 2, 2014; Biwu Zhang, ‘Chinese perceptions of US return to Southeast Asia and the prospect of China’s peaceful rise’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 24: 91, 2015, pp. 176–95; Biwu Zhang, *Chinese perceptions of the US: an exploration of China’s foreign policy motivations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 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: 6, 2013, pp. 1215–43; Zhongying Pang and Hongying Wang, ‘Debating international institutions and global governance: the missing Chinese contribution’, *Review of International Political Economy* 20: 6, 2013, pp. 1189–214.

¹⁶ By selecting articles with ‘core interests’ in the title or keywords. Articles which studied the core interests of certain sectors or other countries (other than the national core interests of China) were filtered out.

supported by interviews with some of the more influential authors identified by the coding results.¹⁷

Understanding China and its foreign policies

We noted above the widespread idea among western commentators 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 China says or 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 holds different views from America, it will be considered assertive'.¹⁸ 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 a developed major power when discussing China's responsibility. This asymmetrical treatment reflects their selfishness and contradictions.'¹⁹

We found that 20.37 per cent of our 108 articles argue that foreign countries/the outside world have 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 Turkestan' to 'attack and slander China'.²⁰ The question that naturally follows is: why? Nearly 18 per cent (17.59 per cent) of the articles argue that the outside world 'misunderstands' China. But this misunderstanding is not seen as accidental; rather, it is seen as driven by interests. As one researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) elaborates: 'A fundamental reason why some foreigners argue that China's diplomacy has become more "assertive" is that this kind of argument fits their interests. They attempted to use this argument to divert attention.'²¹ 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'.²² This article concluded that the international community needs to 'use a more peaceful state of mind to treat an increasingly powerful China'.

Crucially, there is a key shift here from the earlier debates over the 'China threat theory'. Previously, the emphasis was on what China should do to try to

¹⁷ 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>, accessed 2 Feb. 2015.

¹⁸ Wang Fan and Ling Shengli, '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], no. 3, 2013, p. 23.

¹⁹ Wang and Ling, 'Zhongguo de waijiao zhengce bian qiangying le ma?', p. 23.

²⁰ Mei Zhaorong, 'Dui zhongguo guanxi de zai renshi' [A further understanding of China–Europe relations], *Ouzhou yanjiu* [European studies], no. 5, 2009, p. 20.

²¹ Zhou Fangying, '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], no. 4, 2013, p. 56.

²² Wang and Ling, 'Zhongguo de waijiao zhengce bian qiangying le ma?', p. 24.

assuage concerns in others and convince them of China's responsibility and its commitment to peace and stability. 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: now, the global order needs to change too—or, more correctly, key actors in that 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'.²³

As already noted, relations with the United States loom large, and just over a quarter of the articles (25.92 per cent) 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 means to the end of Chinese containment, while a few articles express different views.²⁴ 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 suggesting that the US has been using 'engagement' instead of 'containment'.²⁵ Some argue that, rather than seeing the US as an obstacle to China's rise, China should instead 'use the US to boost its rise'.²⁶ 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 globalized world and to persuade other countries to join together to counter China's rise.²⁷

We should note, though, that the fault here is not seen as lying exclusively with external governments, and that the blame for misunderstanding Chinese intentions is not ascribed exclusively to external perceptions. Public opinion and nationalism within China are seen as forming one driver (among several) 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 per cent of 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 has lacked the courage and determination to use military power when dealing with territorial disputes in recent years—unlike those tough

²³ Wang and Ling, 'Zhongguo de waijiao zhengce bian qiangying le ma?', p. 26.

²⁴ e.g. Li Zeshi, 'Hou jinrong weiji shidai zhongmei zhanlue huxin tantao' [Discussion on Sino-US strategic mutual trust in the era of post-financial crisis], *Tequ jingji* [Special zone economy], no. 12, 2011, pp. 104–106; Shen Dingli, 'Xin zhongguo 60nian: guoji diwei de bianhua' [60 years of new China: changes in international status], *Tansuo yu zhengming* [Exploration and debate], no. 12, 2009, pp. 23–5; Li Haidong, 'Zhongmei guanxi 30 nian: tedian yu qushi' [30 years of Sino-US relations: characteristics and trends], *Dangdai shijie* [Contemporary world], no. 1, 2009, pp. 28–30; Liu, 'Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi'.

²⁵ H. Li, 'Zhongmei guanxi 30 nian', p. 30.

²⁶ Z. Li, 'Hou jinrong weiji shidai zhongmei zhanlue huxin tantao', p. 104.

²⁷ e.g. Liu, 'Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi', p. 43.

foreign policies pursued before reform and opening up when China did not hesitate to take military actions.²⁸

This tendency in public opinion can be attributed in part to the CCP's ruling strategy. In recent decades, the CCP has been using popular propaganda to disseminate the discourse of national rejuvenation in order to gain popular support.²⁹ According to this party-led discourse, 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 quarters to take China's status as a global power—and increasingly as the number two global power—for granted. This in turn generates high expectations of what China *can* and *should* do in international affairs—expectations that, some within China's International Relations (IR) community argue, do not mesh with the reality of the distribution of power in the global order (and China's place in it). As a professor at Beijing University argued:

in China, diplomacy is out of sync 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.³⁰

The resulting suggestion in the debate is that the Chinese government needs to control the negative impacts of nationalism on diplomacy.³¹ For example, one article argues that 'China should prevent nationalist sentiment or certain historical understandings from challenging the rational national security strategy'.³² This refers to the way in which 'patriotic education' by the state has helped shape a nationalism that is strongly influenced by and rooted in 'the Century of Humiliation'.³³ Dominant historical narratives point to the role that foreign intervention and western and Japanese imperialism played in weakening China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁴ 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 it. Only with the rise of the CCP was the tide turned and China's territorial integrity slowly restored—and even now this process is not yet complete. It is this story, so the argument goes, that is at

²⁸ Liang Yunxiang, 'Waijiao ruanying yulun fancha de shengceng jiexi' [An in-depth analysis of public opinions on diplomacy], *Renmin luntan* [People's forum], no. 4, 2013, p. 59.

²⁹ Zeng Jinghan, *The survival of the Chinese Communist Party: evaluating ideology, legitimacy, and party cohesion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2015).

³⁰ Zhu Feng, 'Wei hu hexinliyì jidai waijiao da zhanlue' [To protect China's core interests needs a diplomatic grand strategy], *Renmin luntan* [People's forum], no. 51, 2012, p. 31.

³¹ e.g. Xiao Xi, 'Dongbeiyi anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlue tiaozheng' [On the trend of security in North-East Asia and adjustment of China's strategies], *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* [Teaching and research], no. 7, 2011, p. 79; Xuedong Yang, 'Zhong mei pingdeng guanxi de gengduo xinyi' [More new ideas in the equal Sino-US relations], *Tenmin luntan* [People's forum], no. 274, 2009, p. 34.

³² Xiao, 'Dongbeiyi anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlue tiaozheng', p. 79.

³³ He Yanan, 'History, Chinese nationalism and the emerging Sino-Japanese conflict', *Journal of Contemporary China* 50: 16, 2007, pp. 1–24.

³⁴ While not ignoring the role that was also played by oppressive, corrupt and ideologically bankrupt domestic leaders.

the root of some of the demand for a more assertive China. What is needed now is a shift in approach to cultivate ‘healthy historical views’ built on a ‘great power mentality’ rather than a victim discourse.³⁵ From this perspective, negotiation and compromise are not automatically seen as negative and weak, and some leeway is allowed for diplomacy.

There is also a conflicting school that sees nationalism as having positive consequences for international affairs. For example, a Japan expert based at CASS argues that:

China should gradually get used to negotiating the issues of the Diaoyu Islands with Japan in public environments—i.e. publish detailed meeting minutes after every negotiation. In this way, China’s foreign policy towards Japan will certainly win more and more public understanding and support. Only under public scrutiny and through paying attention to changing public opinion can this kind of negotiation succeed. This is what ‘people’s diplomacy’ should do.³⁶

Who informs the debate?

An analysis of the home institutions of the authors of this body of articles reveals the significance of state-affiliated think-tanks in Chinese academic discourse. University academics account for less than half of the total (41.66 per cent); a third come from think-tanks, including 14.8 per cent from CASS and 5.55 per cent from the Central and Shanghai Party Schools. Just over 5 per cent of articles 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 (former Assistant Foreign Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative of China to the UN). While previous work on legitimacy revealed a nationwide spread of authors,³⁷ the overwhelming majority in this study were located in Beijing (56.48 per cent). While this may in part simply reflect the location of China’s major think-tanks and IR-focused universities, it might also reflect a more Beijing-centric IR debate in contrast to the focus on local government and local governance in legitimacy discourses.

One striking result of a previous study on the nature of regime legitimacy in China (and challenges to it) 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 per cent of papers), Jürgen Habermas (40 per cent), Samuel Huntington (39 per cent), Seymour Lipset (39 per cent), Karl Marx (33 per cent), Gabriel Almond (33 per cent), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (28 per cent), David Easton (24 per cent), Jean-Marc Coicaud (23 per

³⁵ Wang Junsheng, ‘Zhanlue 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], no. 3, 2011, p. 74.

³⁶ Jiang Lifeng, ‘Diaoyudao wenti yu zhongri guanxi’ [Diaoyu Islands and Sino-Japanese relations], *Riben xuekan* [Japanese studies], no. 5, 2012, p. 14.

³⁷ Zeng, ‘The debate on regime legitimacy in China’.

cent) and Aristotle (19 per cent).³⁸ We were told by Chinese scholars that the influence of western scholars remains dominant in Chinese academic writing on politics.³⁹ Furthermore, given the often sensitive nature of debates over domestic political issues, Chinese authors are somewhat reluctant to engage in debates with their peers on, 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 overall they have much less influence than the western political scientists who 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 referred to in only two papers. The most influential western scholar in this debate is probably the fifteenth/sixteenth-century Niccolò Machiavelli, whose *The Prince* is often taken as the source of the concept 'national interests'.⁴⁰ Henry Kissinger is also a relatively familiar figure in the debates, but more as a diplomat than a scholar, with focus on 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 as any of the top ten scholars in the legitimacy debate. Looking more widely beyond the specific debate over core interests, we suggest that the Chinese IR community is much more comfortable with 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 without doubt the most cited scholar (8.3 per cent). 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, with new definitions and categories of national interest.⁴¹

Other frequently cited scholars include Wang Yizhou, Wang Jisi and Niu Xinchun. Niu Xinchun, a researcher based at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (a think-tank related to the Ministry of State Security), is one of the few often-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 (and at times strongly anti-American line), was also mentioned by four articles.

³⁸ Zeng, 'The debate on regime legitimacy in China', p. 618.

³⁹ Zeng, 'The debate on regime legitimacy in China', p. 618.

⁴⁰ e.g. Liang Yunxiang, 'Hexin liyi: meiri jiaoxun yu zhongguo lujin' [Core interests: the lessons from America and Japan and the Chinese path], *Renmin luntan* [People's forum], no. 9, 2012, pp. 28–9.

⁴¹ Zhang, 'Zhongguo hexinliyi zhi bian', p. 19.

Which theories inform the debate?

Mearsheimer's absence from the debate may seem all the more surprising given that realism is the IR theory most often referred to for explanatory theoretical purposes. It is also noteworthy that the realist scholar Yan Xuetong is 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 are partly caused by realist views: for example, China's active development of its relations with African countries is considered by the United States as 'so-called neocolonialism' and 'China's cooperation with Myanmar, Venezuela, Sudan among others is interpreted as "irresponsible" and [amounting to] "support [for] anti-US forces"'.⁴² The theoretical element of the debate, of course, is not confined to IR theory. Varieties of Marxism are referred to by 12.96 per cent of the articles—Marxism itself by 12.96 per cent, Engelism by 6.48 per cent and Leninism by 6.48 per cent.⁴³ We should note, though, that the overwhelming majority of these papers refer to Marxism in the course of explaining what China's core interests are (i.e. socialist ideology and the socialist political economy/political system) rather than while explaining the nature of international relations and the global order.

Some argue that China should develop its own IR theories, so that it can create a discourse system in its favour rather than relying on western theories. The basic argument here is that the dominant theories have been developed in the West by examining western historical experiences and under the influence of 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 thinking 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 defining what China's core interests are or should be. Just over 12 per cent (12.3 per cent) of articles discuss how other countries (including the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Japan and the former Soviet Union) identify/identified and protect/protected their core interests. How the United States in particular has been identifying and protecting

⁴² Niu Changzhen and Xu Gang, 'Zhanlue huxin yu zhongmei guanxi' [Strategic mutual trust and Sino-US relations], *Guoji luntan* [International forum] 12: 3, 2010, p. 14.

⁴³ The overall figure is adjusted to avoid double counting where a paper refers to more than one type of Marxist thinking.

⁴⁴ For examples of Chinese security concepts, see Yin Chaohui, 'Zhongguo gudai guojia anquan zhanlue sixiang de jiejian jiazhi' [Reference value of Chinese ancient strategic thinking on national security], *Lilun yu tansuo* [Theoretical exploration], no. 5, 2013, pp. 64–7.

its core interests is a major source of reference for Chinese intellectuals seeking to elaborate their views on China's core interests. Using American categorizations of national interests as examples,⁴⁵ many argue that China should also disaggregate its national interests into several categories in order to define core interests more clearly.⁴⁶ But, as with other terms that have come in from the outside, it is not enough just to import them unaltered from the sources. Just as Mao argued that Marxism-Leninism should be viewed as a set of guiding principles that needed to be indigenized to reflect the specifics of the contemporary Chinese context, so today 'western' theories need to be *modified* to make them appropriate for China. Hence the ubiquity of the suffix (in Chinese, a prefix—you *zhongguo tese de*) 'with Chinese characteristics' to indigenize a whole range of concepts that have come into China from foreign discourses.

In total, only 4.6 per cent of articles refer to Chinese IR theories as an explanatory tool. The most common form of indigenous thinking is not a new theory but a relatively old one. While Mao Zedong's 'theory of the three worlds' might not be an IR theory as such (in the way that, for example, liberalism or realism is), it is often treated as one in Chinese discourse.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 and cultural traditions that emphasize harmony, which have become embedded in China's contemporary 'peaceful development' philosophy and strategy.⁴⁹ The roots of how China conceives of its core interests are thus found in 'one China—an ancient Chinese national security

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 DC, 2000).

⁴⁶ e.g. Zhao Yi, 'Ba zhongguo de hexinliyi jieding de geng qingxi zhunque' [To define China's core interests more clearly and accurately], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 14, 2011, p. 65; Niu Xinchun, 'Zhongguo zai zhongdong de liyi yu yingxiangli fenxi' [Analyse China's interests and influence in the Middle East], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 10, 2013, p. 47; Wang Gonglong, 'Guojia hexinliyi jiqi jieding' [Core national interests and their definition], *Shanghai xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Shanghai Administration Institute] 12: 6, 2011, p. 77.

⁴⁷ Whether the theory is really Mao's or perhaps owes more to others such as Zhou Enlai may be debatable, but in these debates the theory is firmly associated with Mao. See e.g. Gong Li, '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], no. 8, 2012, pp. 24–30; Zhang, 'Zhongguo hexinliyi zhibian'; Xing Hua, 'Zhong ou guanxi de kuayueshi fazhan' [Leapfrog development of China–EU relations], *Guoji wenti yanjiu* [International affairs studies], no. 1, 2010, pp. 10–15.

⁴⁸ Gong, 'Sange shijie huafen lilun dui dangdai zhongguo de shenyuan yingxiang', p. 29.

⁴⁹ Gong Li, 'Zou heping fazhan daolu yu guojia hexinliyi de weiwei' [Peaceful development and the maintenance of national core interests], *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* [Contemporary world and socialism], no. 5, 2013, pp. 110–13.

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, focusing 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 analysis is the overall lack of theoretical engagement in the literature. Although realism is the most commonly cited theory, it is referred to only in 13.88 per cent of articles. If we add in liberalism and idealism (in 8.33 per cent and 4.63 per cent of papers respectively), neo-liberalism (2.77 per cent) and constructivism (0.92 per cent), and then discount for double counting (i.e. papers that refer to more than one theory), only 20.37 per cent of all papers refer to the mainstream IR theories. Or, to put it another way, almost four-fifths of the papers did not 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 (even more typically, of the United States), rather than to understand Chinese actions and intentions.

Writing on Chinese analyses of the international political economy of globalization, Zhu and Pearson argue 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 find that when it comes to the study of international institutions and global governance, 'foreign scholarship plays a role' and many authors cite relevant western theories.⁵⁴ Clearly,

⁵⁰ Yin, 'Zhongguo gudai guojia anquan zhanlue sixiang de jiejian jiazhi', p. 65.

⁵¹ Yang Mian, 'Pingheng zhongguo waijiao de gangxing yu rouxing' [To balance the rigidity and flexibility of China's diplomacy], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 5, 2011, p. 44.

⁵² Yang, 'Pingheng zhongguo waijiao de gangxing yu rouxing', p. 44.

⁵³ Zhu and Pearson, 'Globalization and the role of the state', p. 1216.

⁵⁴ Pang and Wang, 'Debating international institutions and global governance: the missing Chinese contribution'.

our findings chime more with the conclusions of the former than the latter. Rather than being driven by theoretical concerns, the literature is dominated by 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 changes in close association with 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 (of which more shortly).⁵⁶

After 2009, the focus of attention shifted to Sino-US affairs, which is by far the single most debated relationship (dealt with in 31.48 per cent of papers). By 2011, another new shift could be discerned as debates began to focus on territorial disputes in the South China Sea and over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. 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 debate 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 United States and Europe to regional issues in China's own backyard. Over 20 per cent of the papers published between 2011 and 2013 had a specific regional focus.⁵⁷ However, as Zhang notes, when Chinese academics discuss South-East Asia, the role of the United States in the region and what this means for China is never far below the surface (either implicitly or explicitly).⁵⁸

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. Mei, 'Dui zhongguo guanxi de zai renshi'.

⁵⁷ Using the terms East Asia, South-East 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'.

Which leaders' visions matter?

Given that the debates are heavily influenced by events, it is perhaps not surprising that they are also strongly shaped by the views and statements of top leaders.⁵⁹ Hu Jintao was party leader from 2002 to 2012 and thus for almost all of our census period (2008–13). His words and opinions are cited in 29.62 per cent of articles. But this proportion is exceeded by Xi Jinping—who is perceived to have taken a tougher position on the issue of core interests than his predecessors—even though he was only China's top leader for just over a year within our census period: his discourse on 'core interests', quoted at the beginning of this article, is cited by 33.33 per cent of all papers published in 2013. In addition, 19.04 per cent of articles published that year mentioned Xi's ideological slogan the 'China dream'—a still rather poorly developed concept built around the notion of China's national rejuvenation. For example, an article published in *Red Flag Articles* argues that the 'China dream opens a new page of China's national defence strategy' and that 'China should develop a powerful military defence system in order to protect its core interests'.⁶⁰

We also find a view emerging in recent years 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 now time to abandon this position and take a new and 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 prioritized 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 This strategy is seen as having been largely successful in helping to get China 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' and the time is ripe for China to take a greater international role (including taking on more international

⁵⁹ In addition to the top leaders, we also noted the importance of senior Chinese officials in the debate. The former state councillor Dai Bingguo is mentioned by 8.55% of articles—partly because his discourse on 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 Yang Da, 'Zhongguo meng kaiqi heping fazhan de guofang zhanlue' [China dream opens the national defence strategy of peaceful development], *Hongqi wengao* [Red flag articles], no. 22, 2013, p. 15.

⁶¹ Hu Jian, 'Cong taoguang yanghui dao jiji zuowei: zhongguo waijiao siwen, zhanlue 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], no. 4, 2012, pp. 107–109.

⁶² J. Wang, 'Zhanlue huanjing de bianqian yu guojia liyi de jieding: zhongguo guoji jiaose de siwei gexin', p. 74.

responsibilities).⁶³ This idea is elaborated in a recent article by Yan, which argues that China should adopt 'striving for achievement' as its new grand strategy—and, indeed, that it already has since the assumption of power by Xi Jinping.⁶⁴

Yan's view does not reflect a new consensus, and is criticized by some. For example, one professor in the CPS argues that China is still underdeveloped and thus development rather than security remains its highest priority.⁶⁵ To many Chinese, the current international environment is 'a period of strategic opportunities' for the rise of China, in which China should focus on economic development and keep quiet. And, notwithstanding Yan's high profile, we still find that a quarter of all articles mention Deng Xiaoping, the original architect of the 'low profile' strategy.

As we will discuss later, these two contrary views on the fundamentals of China's grand strategy are partly based on their different evaluations of how the country's core interests should be understood and how secure they are. 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, we plan to conduct a future study on how this re-evaluation of the level of security of China's core interests may change China's grand strategy.

What are China's core interests?

What exactly are China's core interests? The concept of 'core interests' is a vague one, open to interpretation, in the Chinese discourse—even after the release of the 2011 White Paper. A majority of articles discuss China's core interests only implicitly; just 23.1 per cent of articles clearly define what China's core interests are. Most of these take a line consistent with the official tone, evolving 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 2011, the standard was the White Paper released that September: 31.4 per cent of subsequent articles refer to China's core interests as defined by the White Paper.

Although academic views did not contradict the official line, the official line itself is not particularly precisely drawn, allowing considerable leeway for interpretation. For example, there is no consensus over whether China's core interests can include some that lie outside the country. Some argue that all China's core interests are domestic issues: that China is an 'inward-looking country' whose

⁶³ Fan Qinghua, 'Zhongmei guanxi: ruhe caineng jiankang fazhan' [Sino-US relations: how to develop healthily], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 5, 2011, p. 26.

⁶⁴ Yan Xuotong, 'From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7: 2, 2014, pp. 153–84.

⁶⁵ J. Liu, 'Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo wajiao de fansi', p. 40.

⁶⁶ Dai Bingguo, 'Dai Bingguo: the core interests of the People's Republic of China', 7 Aug. 2009, <http://china-digitaltimes.net/2009/08/dai-bingguo-%E6%88%B4%E7%A7%89%E5%9B%BD-the-core-interests-of-the-prc/>, accessed 1 Feb. 2015.

culture, traditions and philosophy determine that *all* of its core interests are ‘within China’.⁶⁷ Others 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 Centre, and Li Bing, a deputy director in the CCP’s Department of Organization, argues that what he terms ‘international strategic access’ (*guoji zhanlue tongdao*) ‘involves’ China’s core interests because it relates to international trade, security and sovereignty.⁶⁹ Specifically, they consider the ‘first island chain’ as a key element in US and Japanese 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 conclude that China should develop and enhance its navy in order to ‘prepare for 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 an internal domestic Chinese issue in Chinese debate may include territories that others might think are not Chinese at all. Crucially, though, if they are deemed by China to be in China, then there is no leeway for any discussion or negotiation with others: territorial integrity is a bottom-line non-negotiable interest. The position of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang as inalienable and integral parts of China is taken for granted and not open for discussion. So when they are considered in the debate (in 24.07 per cent, 15.74 per cent and 8.3 per cent of papers respectively), the main focus is on foreign governments’ policies—especially US policy—towards those regions; more so even than on the potential separatist policies promoted by restive forces in these regions themselves. It is argued that the policies of certain foreign governments have ‘seriously challenged’ China’s core interests. Sometimes the referent is ethnicity rather than territory, but here too the focus is on why only China can deal with (and even, in some discourses, talk about) China’s ethnic affairs and on attempts by overseas anti-Chinese forces 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 the group of South China Sea islands ‘definitely belongs to China’s core interests because

⁶⁷ Chu Shulong and Ying Chen, ‘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], no. 4, 2012, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Niu, ‘Zhongguo zai zhongdong de liyi yu yingxiangli fenxi’, p. 47.

⁶⁹ This refers to the free passage of goods and resources across international borders and through major sea lanes of communication. Li Zhongjie and Li Bing, ‘Zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlue tongdao wenti shang de zhanlue duice’ [Pay close attention to making China’s strategy to respond to international strategic passage], *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* [Contemporary world and socialism], no. 5, 2011, pp. 108, 109.

⁷⁰ Z. Li and B. Li, ‘Zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlue tongdao wenti shang de zhanlue duice’, p. 110.

⁷¹ Z. Li and B. Li, ‘Zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlue tongdao wenti shang de zhanlue duice’, p. 112.

⁷² e.g. Yu Zidong, ‘Lun minzu wenti yu zhongguo hexinliyi de xiangguanxi’ [Discuss the relevance of ethnic affairs and China’s core interests], *Renmin luntan* [People’s forum], no. 350, 2011, pp. 42–5.

it relates to 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 a core interest in a couple of articles. One article argues that the 'Diaoyu Islands have always been China's territory and thus concern China's core interests—that it should never allow others to infringe. In this regard, there is nothing to negotiate with Japan.' This 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 per cent of papers refer to the South China Sea islands as constituting a core interest, and only 1.85 per cent refer to the Diaoyu Islands in this way.

A smaller group of scholars (1.85 per cent of articles) extend the range of China's core interests to the Korean peninsula. For example, Niu Xinchun argues that 'the stability and development of the Korean peninsula directly relate to China's core interests'.⁷⁵ A more explicit and ambitious view is held by a professor at Jilin University, Xiao Xi, who argued in an article funded by two governmental projects that regional leadership in North-East Asia is among China's core interests. More specifically, Xiao argues that 'China's core interests in North-East Asia are reflected in ensuring that dominance in the North-East 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 a free trade zone in North-East 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 core interests specifically identified in the debate include, along with ideology and the political system, 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: none of these is 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 respectively as the most important core interests. By comparison,

⁷³ G. Wang, 'Guojia hexinliyi jiqi jieding', p. 80.

⁷⁴ Jiang, 'Diaoyudao wenti yu zhongri guanxi', p. 48.

⁷⁵ Niu Xinchun, 'Zhongmei zhanlue huxin: gainian, wenti ji tiaozhan' [The strategic mutual trust between China and the US: concepts, issues and challenges], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 3, 2010, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Xiao, 'Dongbeiyi anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlue tiaozheng', p. 76.

⁷⁷ Xiao, 'Dongbeiyi anquan zouxiang yu zhongguo zhanlue tiaozheng', p. 79.

⁷⁸ Chen Yanbin and Zhou Bin, 'Guowai jiazhi guan de ninglian jiqi qishi' [The summary of foreign values and its implications], *Makesizhuyi yanjiu* [Marxism studies], no. 10, 2012, p. 142.

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

By far the biggest problem for China in respect of protecting its core interests is the United States. Taiwan is not only important in itself for China; it is also considered to be the biggest problem in Sino-US relations. Moreover, the US is blamed for 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 per cent of papers refer to US policy towards China on a range of other issues (especially Xinjiang, Tibet and human rights policies) as threatening China's core interests. It is argued that the US has never 'cared' about China's core interests. For example, one article argues: 'The US has never had any scruples respecting 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 the core interests of the US and China are 'opposite and confrontational ... this fundamentally determines that Sino-US relations cannot be friendly—it may even be an opposing and confrontational relationship'.⁸² This view echoes the prediction 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.

There is, then, a tendency to treat tensions in US–Chinese relations as 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

⁷⁹ Chu Shulong and Fang Liwei, 'Zhongmei guanxi de changqi zoushi' [Long-term trend of Sino-US relations], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 6, 2010, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Bian Qingzu, 'Dui 2010 nian zhongmei liangguo boyi de sikao' [A reflection on China–US gamesmanship in 2010], *Heping he fazhan* [Peace and development], no. 2, 2011, p. 21.

⁸¹ Chu and Ying, 'Dui zhongmeiguanxi de lixing kaoliang yu zhanwang', p. 27; Chu and Fang, 'Zhongmei guanxi de changqi zoushi'.

⁸² Chu and Fang, 'Zhongmei guanxi de changqi zoushi', p. 22.

⁸³ Dong Feng, 'Zhongmei junshi guanxi jiuqing zenme le?' [What is wrong with US–China military relations?], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 13, 2010, p. 42.

Core interests under threat?

Chinese intellectuals have very different evaluations of the level of (in)security of China's core interests, which in turn result in very different policy recommendations. A fifth of articles (20.37 per cent) use the words 'challenged' or 'damaged' (*weihai*, *sunhai* or *tiaozhan*) in the course of reaching the conclusion that China should abandon its 'keeping a low profile' strategy. For example, Zhu Feng, a professor at 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 'striving for achievement' strategy, mentioned above.

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

If we make a careful assessment, these six core interests [defined by the 2011 White Paper] are not under threat. Although the disputes in the South China Sea concern 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 face problems. For example, a professor at 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 United States 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: over half the articles (56.4 per cent) see the US as damaging China's national interests. Other frequently mentioned challenger countries include Japan (16.66 per cent), Vietnam (8.3 per cent) and the Philippines (7.4 per cent). Most of these articles discuss China's territorial disputes with countries which are typically referred to as 'unreasonable troublemakers'. It is argued that these countries have been taking

⁸⁴ Zhu, 'Wei hu hexin li yi jidai wai jiao da zhan lue', p. 30.

⁸⁵ J. Liu, 'Guanyu jin jinian zhongguo waijiao de fansi', p. 41.

⁸⁶ Liang, 'Hexin liyi: meiri jiaoxun yu zhongguo lujin', p. 29.

the 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 blaming North Korea, a semi-ally of China, for damaging China’s interests. The first focuses on China’s direct disputes with North Korea on issues of oil, gas and fisheries, while the second considers a more indirect threat generated by North Korea’s nuclear programme. The third also looks at an indirect threat, arguing that as long as North Korea is the cause of uncertainty and instability, the United States will use it 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 as ‘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 United States in the articles we surveyed, there is a recognition that it might also be a force for good, with 11.11 per cent of articles arguing that the US may help or has already helped China to protect its interests—most notably in respect of mediating Chinese territorial/sovereignty issues relating to Taiwan⁹⁰ and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.⁹¹ One article even argues that Japan can work with China to secure Chinese interests in and over Taiwan.⁹²

Noticeably, none of these articles 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 entirely positive. We find that 5.5 per cent of articles argue that Russia will help, or has helped, China to protect its interests; some consider the Sino-Russian relationship to be ‘one of the most important bilateral relationships’⁹⁴ and note that the two countries 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: ‘For a long time, China and Russia have been discriminated against by the West to varying degrees. The establishment of a Sino-Russian strategic

⁸⁷ e.g. Li Xiangyang, ‘Zhongguo jueqi guochengzhong jie jue bianhai wenti de chulu’ [Solutions of maritime territory during the rise of China], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 8, 2012, p. 18.

⁸⁸ Guo Changlin, ‘Mei zhanlue zhongxin dongyi hou de zhongguo zhoubian anquan huanjing’ [China’s peripheral security after the US conducted the eastward shift of its strategic centre of gravity], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 10, 2013, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Zhang Yunling, ‘Xianshi wajiao buneng jinping 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], no. 12, 2013, p. 55.

⁹⁰ e.g. Ding Yuan, ‘Guojia hexinliyi yu yatai xiaoguo wajiao zhanlue 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], no. 15, 2013, p. 174.

⁹¹ e.g. Li Shuzhen, ‘Cong diaoyudao zhengduan kan zhongmeiri daguo zhanlue de jiaoliang he 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], no. 7, 2013, pp. 58–62.

⁹² Ding, ‘Guojia hexinliyi yu yatai xiaoguo wajiao zhanlue yanjiu’, p. 174.

⁹³ Although conflicting economic interests are mentioned.

⁹⁴ e.g. Zhao Mingwen, ‘Zhong e quanxin de guojia hezuo moshi’ [The new cooperation model between China and Russia], *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* [Outlook weekly], no. 25, 2009, p. 56.

partnership can enhance each country'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 what is often portrayed in the West as a new revisionist (of sorts) Sino-Russian alliance. It is argued that anti-West cooperation is not the core of Sino-Russian relations and that both China and Russia do have to work with the West.⁹⁷ Accordingly, 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? About a sixth (15.74 per cent) of articles argue that China should 'resolutely safeguard' (*jianjue weihi*) its core interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union is used as an example to warn of 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 for sovereign states.⁹⁹

While emphasizing the uncompromising stance on core interests, 10.18 per cent of 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 in disputes on secondary interests. However, regarding disputes on core interests, we should not compromise.'¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

There is something of a groundswell 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 many voices of caution as well. This caution is in part at least built on a realization that perceptions matter in international politics. How China is seen by others—for 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 from getting what it wants.

⁹⁵ Zhao, 'Zhong e quanxin de guojia hezuo moshi', p. 56.

⁹⁶ e.g. Z. Li and B. Li, 'Zhuanjin zhiding zhongguo zai guoji zhanlue tongdao wenti shang de zhanlue duice', p. 112.

⁹⁷ e.g. Jiang Yi, 'Bu kaopu de zhong e jiemengshuo' [Sino-Russia alliance does not fly], *Shijie zhishi* [World affairs], no. 5, 2012, pp. 52–3.

⁹⁸ Jiang, 'Bu kaopu de zhong e jiemengshuo', p. 53.

⁹⁹ Zhao, 'Ba zhongguo de hexin liyi jieding de geng qingxi zhunque', p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Zhang Lei, 'Lun zhongmei shuangbian touzi xieding fanben: guanyu waihui zhuanqi tiaokuan de fenqi' [The differences in model bilateral investment treaty of China and United States on foreign currency transference clause], *Shanghai jinrong* [Shanghai finance], no. 10, 2013, p. 93.

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 in this article was simply to open up domestic discourses to a wider IR audience, to show the contours of the Chinese debate on China's place in the world and the considerable plurality of ideas that can be found within this debate. Using content analysis built around the construction of a rigorous coding manual (which 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 texts not only involves conventional, quantitative-based content analysis where methodological rigour is required, but also entails making qualitative judgements on orientations where prowess in distinguishing nuances in the Chinese language is essential. To be sure, this 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 brief 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 to change perceptions in China about its 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 adjustment in power distributions (in which the crisis played a key part).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 this theoretical power can best be translated into actual policies that serve national interests in ways that do not generate negative external responses. The next task for the authors of this article, then, is to turn our attention to Chinese discourses on what means should be used to secure these interests.

¹⁰¹ Wang Zaibang, 'Shilun zhanlüe jiyuqi xin jieduan neihan yu tiaojian de bianhua' [Changing contexts and contents in the new strategic opportunity period], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations], no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–6.