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WHO TRULY DRIVES CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY: A STUDY OF BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS AND THE ROLE OF MULTIPLE ACTORS

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Abstract

This paper looks at what scholars have said about how China makes its foreign policy and pushes back against the common idea that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership is the only actor calling the shots. Using Yu Jie and Lucy Ridout's *Who Decides China's Foreign Policy?* (2021) as the main source, and drawing on earlier work by Lampton (1992), Jakobson (2010), and Wong (2018), I argue that China's foreign policy is actually shaped through a mix of different domestic players. Instead of everything being dictated from the top, ministries, provincial governments, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and even informal networks among elites all influence the final decisions in their own ways.

This paper also points out that when we look at specific areas like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the South China Sea, or China's economic diplomacy, we can actually see signs of different government actors pulling in their own directions. These cases show that policies aren't always perfectly coordinated, and sometimes they turn out fragmented or slow because ministries and other agencies have their own interests. This goes against the idea that China's system is completely centralized or that all decisions are tightly controlled from the very top. Noticing these patterns helps us better understand what China is doing right now and gives us a clearer sense of how its foreign policy might evolve in the future.

Keywords:

Bureaucratic Politics, Chinese Foreign Policy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Liberation Army, State-Owned Enterprises, Provincial Governments, Elite Networks, Digital Nationalism, Multi-Actor Framework, CCP Factionalism, Xi Jinping

Introduction

As China's global influence grows, scholars increasingly debate how the country formulates its foreign policy. Traditional interpretations present China as a highly centralized authoritarian state where the top leadership, especially the General Secretary and the Politburo Standing Committee that dominates foreign policy (Yu and Ridout, 2021). Recent research shows that China's policymaking kind of works like what foreign policy scholars call a "bureaucratic politics" model, which is basically, where you stand depends on where you sit, meaning that the organization you're in shapes what you want (Allison and Halperin, 1972). Different parts of the government, like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Central Military Commission (CMC), the PLA, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), and state-owned companies, all affect policy in their own ways because of their expertise, resources, and priorities (Zhang, 2016). On top of that, elite networks, CCP factions, digital nationalism, public opinion, and even international pressures can influence decisions by shaping what leaders see as risky or important (Weiss, 2019). So instead of having just one clear strategy, China's foreign policy often comes out of a mix of leadership goals, bureaucratic bargaining, and outside pressures. Looking at how these pieces fit together helps explain why China can act boldly sometimes, cautiously at other times, and even a bit inconsistently.

Historical Pattern

Since 1949, China's foreign policymaking has undergone major shifts. Under Mao Zedong, decisions were mostly driven by ideology and his personal views. Back then, ministries didn't really have much power, and foreign policy was mostly focused on revolutionary goals (Zhang 2016). But Deng Xiaoping's reforms changed things a lot. As China tried to modernize its economy, different ministries had to start working together, which helped create more professional institutions and clearer ways for agencies to coordinate (Yu and Ridout, 2021). When China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), this went even further; foreign economic policy got more structured, and agencies like MOFCOM gained more influence as they took on new responsibilities (Kennedy, 2005).

After Tiananmen, the military and foreign affairs departments got more professional, which meant the PLA got better at strategy and had a more official say in maritime and security matters. Even though Xi Jinping has tried to centralize power, different parts of the government still affect how policies actually happen. For example, provincial governments still have quite a bit of control over cross-border trade and many BRI projects (Wong, 2018). Taken together, these changes show that China's system today is a kind of hybrid: power is very centralized at the top, but the bureaucratic institutions underneath have grown stronger and more capable, which means they can still shape outcomes in important ways.

Research Questions

- How much control do China's top leaders really have over setting the foreign policy agenda and making final decisions?
- In what ways do bureaucratic institutions like the MFA, CMC/PLA, NDRC, and state-owned enterprises influence China's actions abroad through their expertise, resources, and ability to implement policies?
- How do informal networks, public opinion at home, and pressures from other countries affect or limit China's foreign policy choices?
- Do provincial governments sometimes create conflicts or fragmentation by chasing local economic interests that don't always match national diplomatic goals?
- How does digital nationalism influence how willing leaders are to compromise during foreign crises?

These questions help identify specific mechanisms of influence within China's policymaking process and illuminate sources of policy inconsistency.

Summary of Existing Scholarly Debate

1. Leadership-Centered Perspectives: Some researchers argue that China's foreign policy reflects strong centralized control. Some scholars state that China's foreign policy is mostly tightly controlled from the top. Xi Jinping's personal authority, especially since he leads all the major foreign affairs bodies, supports this idea (Yu and Ridout, 2021). Big initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) are often used as examples of policies that really reflect the leader's vision (Rolland 2019).

2. Bureaucratic Politics and Institutional Influence: Bureaucratic politics scholars argue that ministries and commissions shape foreign policy because they control expertise, information, and implementation. Yu and Ridout (2021) show that different government agencies often compete when policies are being made. Jost and Li (2025) point out that the way officials are promoted affects how bureaucrats act, and Lampton (1992) describes lots of bargaining between agencies. Jakobson and Knox (2010) highlight how state-owned enterprises and research institutes are becoming more influential, especially in areas like energy and technology diplomacy. Wong (2018)

finds that provincial governments sometimes push for policies that help their local economies, even if those policies don't line up with Beijing's bigger strategic goals.

3. Informal Politics, Factionalism, and Elite Networks: Scholars such as Zhang (2016) and Shirk (2007) emphasize the role of informal networks, personal relationships, and factional bargaining within the CCP. Elite ties can accelerate or block policy proposals.

4. Public Opinion and Digital Nationalism: Recent studies suggest that public opinion is playing a bigger role in China's foreign policy. Digital nationalism, spread through social media sites like Weibo and Bilibili, can make it harder for leaders to show a willingness to compromise, especially during crises (Weiss, 2019).

5. External Pressures: China's policymakers also have to react to things happening outside the country, like international events, sanctions, military tensions, and economic pressures. These external factors can change domestic debates and affect what different bureaucratic actors want (Christensen, 2020). Overall, even though top leaders still hold a lot of power, most scholars agree that China's policymaking is complex, often fragmented, and shaped by many different players.

Outline of Approach

The final research paper will analyze China's foreign policymaking through three lenses:

1. Leadership & Agenda-Setting: How top leaders define strategic priorities and how these priorities shape foreign policy initiatives.

2. Bureaucratic Implementation & Policy Fragmentation: How ministries, state-owned enterprises, and provincial governments carry out and sometimes reinterpret the central government's directives.

3. Informal Politics & External Constraints: How elite networks, public opinion, and global pressures shape or limit China's foreign policy behavior. The paper will integrate case studies such as the South China Sea disputes, BRI implementation differences across provinces, and China's foreign economic policy toward the U.S. and EU.

Leadership and Agenda-Setting in China's Foreign Policy

A big part of understanding China's foreign policy is figuring out how the country's top leaders set their priorities. Under Xi Jinping, foreign policy has definitely become more centralized, but that doesn't mean the system has become simpler. Instead of controlling every tiny detail, the central leadership sets the overall goals, ideology, and political tone that guide everyone else in the bureaucracy. Xi himself chairs the Foreign Affairs Commission and the Central National Security Commission, which gives him much more agenda-setting power than earlier leaders had (Yu and Ridout, 2021). These commissions don't write every policy from start to finish, but they outline the main direction and limits that lower-level agencies must follow.

Xi's foreign policy vision combines national rejuvenation, ideological security, protection of sovereignty, and the expansion of China's influence abroad. Big international projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Security Initiative all show how important top-level guidance is in China's foreign policy. Ministries and agencies carry out the actual work, but the broader political story and long-term vision come directly from the leadership. The BRI, for instance, is widely seen as Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project and is often cited as proof of how leader-driven the system is. But even with the BRI, the day-to-day decisions and project details have been heavily shaped by different bureaucracies competing for influence, financial limitations, and the ambitions of provincial governments (Rolland, 2019 and Wong, 2018).

Leadership also plays a central role in shaping how China positions itself during moments of crisis. A good example of this is the rise of the assertive diplomatic style known as "wolf warrior diplomacy." This approach did not come from the MFA acting on its own; rather, it was a response to high-level political signals that encouraged officials to defend China's image more forcefully (Zhang, 2016). However, once these signals were sent out, both MFA officials and state media interpreted them in their own ways, which resulted in noticeable inconsistencies in tone and messaging across different platforms.

Overall, leadership sets the ideological tone and national priorities, but the practical execution remains distributed across a large and often fragmented bureaucratic system. The tension between centralized political authority and decentralized implementation is one of the defining features of China's foreign policymaking today.

Bureaucratic Implementation and Policy Fragmentation

While the leadership articulates strategic visions, the actual work of foreign policy occurs within a complex bureaucracy. Each ministry or agency brings its own incentives, expertise, and institutional interests, which leads to outcomes that sometimes diverge from the leadership's intentions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) traditionally manages diplomacy, crisis communication, and China's global public image. However, its overall influence is often constrained because it does not control the key financial or security resources needed to carry out many policies. As a result, the MFA often ends up in a position where it is expected to negotiate major international agreements but does not have real authority over the agencies responsible for putting those agreements into practice. Lampton (1992) describes this as a classic example of bureaucratic bargaining, where ministries must negotiate with one another to achieve policy results.

Security-related issues highlight these constraints clearly. The PLA and the Central Military Commission (CMC) possess their own institutional priorities, which can shape China's behavior in maritime disputes. Research shows that the PLA often pushes for a stronger, more assertive stance in the South China Sea because it wants to advance its naval modernization, test out new capabilities, and reinforce deterrence (Zhang, 2016). At the same time, the MFA usually prefers to take a softer approach and de-escalate tensions in order to protect China's broader international reputation. These different priorities help explain why China sometimes ends up acting in ways that seem contradictory, with diplomatic statements that are conciliatory alongside military actions that are more aggressive.

Economic agencies add another layer of complexity. MOFCOM, the NDRC, and financial institutions like the China Development Bank all play key roles in economic diplomacy and in carrying out the BRI. Each of these actors controls different pieces of the funding, negotiation, and implementation process, which can make coordination between them seriously challenging. Kennedy (2005) argues that China's accession to the WTO empowered regulators and economic agencies by expanding their technical responsibilities, which increased bureaucratic pluralism within the foreign policymaking system.

Provincial governments contribute to fragmentation as well. Wong (2018) mentions that provinces such as Yunnan, Guangxi, and Xinjiang often engage in foreign economic activities to boost their own local development. Sometimes, this leads to cross-border projects that don't completely line up with China's national diplomatic goals. For instance, provincial officials may push aggressively for infrastructure projects in Southeast or Central Asia even when the MFA raises concerns about political risk, debt sustainability, or diplomatic tensions.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) also play an important role due to their ability to initiate large-scale overseas investments. Jakobson and Knox (2010) find that SOEs, particularly in the energy and technology sectors, lobby for access to foreign markets and secure state financing for overseas projects, sometimes shaping the direction of China's economic diplomacy.

Taken together, the behavior of ministries, SOEs, and provincial governments demonstrates how bureaucratic incentives create fragmented policy outcomes. These actors do not openly challenge leadership priorities, but they interpret and implement directives in ways that reflect their own institutional interests.

Informal Politics, Public Opinion, and External Pressures

In addition to formal institutions, informal politics and external forces play important roles in shaping China's foreign policy. Informal networks within the CCP, such as personal connections, factional loyalties, and mentor-protege relationships, often play a big role in determining who gets access to important decision-making positions. Scholars like Shirk (2007) and Zhang (2016) argue that these networks can either speed up or block policy proposals within the bureaucracy. Even under Xi, who has weakened many factions, elite ties still influence how different actors interpret political signals and compete for influence.

Public opinion, especially online nationalism, has become a more significant constraint in recent years. Weiss (2019) shows that nationalist sentiment on social media can make leaders less willing to compromise, especially during tense situations with countries like Japan, the United States, or other regional actors. Even though the leadership ultimately controls the media environment, they still have to take public backlash online into account, because it can weaken their legitimacy or give more influence to hardliners within the bureaucracy. The NBA controversy, public reactions to Taiwan, and large-scale anti-Japanese protests illustrate how online nationalists can push policymakers toward more confrontational positions.

External pressures also shape domestic bureaucratic behavior. Christensen (2020) argues that international pressures, like sanctions, economic competition, and military tensions, often push China's bureaucratic actors to change their strategies. For example, U.S. export controls on Chinese technology have increased the influence of industrial and economic ministries, which now focus more on achieving technological self-sufficiency. Similarly, growing tensions in the South China Sea have increased the influence of the PLA Navy, as external threats justify expanded budgets and operational authority.

These informal and external factors influence the entire policymaking system by shifting bureaucratic incentives, amplifying public sentiment, and altering the political risks associated with different foreign policy options. As a result, China's foreign policy often reflects a mix of leader-driven objectives, bureaucratic bargaining, nationalist pressure, and reactions to global changes.

Case Studies: Applying the Multi-Actor Framework

1. South China Sea Disputes

The South China Sea is a clear example of how China's foreign policy is shaped by leadership priorities, bureaucratic competition, and outside pressures all at once. The top leadership sets big-picture goals, like defending sovereignty and expanding maritime capabilities, but actually making those goals happen involves a lot of different players. The PLA Navy, for example, pushes for regular patrols and building up infrastructure on disputed islands to show strength and gain experience. Meanwhile, the MFA tries to manage the diplomatic side, negotiating with ASEAN and avoiding any major escalation. On top of that, outside pressures, especially U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations, add more tension, which often pushes the PLA to show it means business

(Christensen, 2020). The result is that China's actions in the South China Sea can look tough militarily, while the diplomatic messaging is sometimes all over the place.

2. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative shows how big leadership visions interact with a messy, fragmented bureaucracy. Even though Xi Jinping launched it as a top foreign policy priority, the day-to-day decisions about projects are made by the NDRC, MOFCOM, EXIM Bank, SOEs, and provincial governments. This means that projects end up varying a lot in quality, funding, and timing. Some provinces push projects that help their local industries but come with big diplomatic risks, while SOEs chase overseas contracts that bring in money for themselves but don't always match national sustainability goals (Wong, 2018; Jakobson and Knox, 2010). All of this shows that you can't fully understand the outcomes of the BRI just by looking at it as a leader-driven initiative.

3. Economic Diplomacy Toward the United States and the EU

China's recent economic tensions with the United States and Europe show how complicated policymaking can be when multiple actors are involved. This leadership frames its relationship with the U.S. as part of a larger strategic rivalry. However, economic agencies have to respond to things like tariffs, supply chain disruptions, and technology restrictions. MOFCOM takes the lead on negotiating trade deals, industrial ministries focus on advancing technology, and propaganda agencies try to shape public perception. On top of that, public opinion becomes more sensitive during crises, which makes it harder for leaders to show a conciliatory approach (Weiss, 2019). This mix of factors often produces conflicting signals, where periods of negotiation and reassurance happen alongside nationalist rhetoric and retaliatory actions.

Conclusion

Overall, China's foreign policy is shaped by a mix of different factors, like the top leadership, the various government agencies, informal networks, public opinion, and pressures from other countries. The leaders decide the big-picture goals and the overall direction, but it's really the ministries, state-owned companies, and provincial governments that make sure those goals actually happen on the ground. On top of that, informal politics and online nationalism affect the risks leaders have to think about, while international pressures influence what bureaucrats can and cannot do. Altogether, these forces create a system that isn't completely centralized but isn't fully fragmented either. Instead, it works as a hybrid model, where strong political authority exists alongside complex negotiations and bargaining between institutions.

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