

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
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First, I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me to share my thoughts at this hearing today.² The primary decision-making locus for foreign policy in Beijing can be found in the black box of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Other actors who try to shape China's thinking with regard to foreign policy can be found in the party apparatus, government agencies, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Foreign Ministry plays a vital role in interpreting policies, made at the highest levels, and in carrying them out.

Having said this, my task today is to discuss whether there is an emergence of new interest groups in China's foreign policy-making process. I would like to identify who these interest groups are and address the influence they have on foreign policy decision-making. In tandem with the emergence of these new interest groups vying to affect China's formation of foreign policies, I will address how the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has changed.

Before I delve into this subject, I would like to first clarify that — within a Chinese context — the use of the term “interest groups” is not always appropriate.

Articulation of Group Interests ≠ Interest Groups

Increasingly in recent years, when talking about China's socioeconomic transformation, we see the emergence of the term, “interest groups,” in scholarly work and in the press. It's true that many scholars have noted the emergence of a civil society (or civil societies) in China. The largest and most active groups are economically driven. However, the operation and purpose of these diverse “organizations,” don't really fit within the understanding of the term interest

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- I wish to thank Dr. James Leibold at La Trobe University for his comment on an early draft of this statement.

groups that are widely discussed in liberal democracies. In China, most groups are guided by the Chinese state. While some of these groups are afforded quasi-official status, most are operated by local elites who seek to mediate interests between the dominant system (i.e., the state) and the subsystem (i.e., society). In fact, the vast majority expect to become part of the dominant system, rather than to counter it. The function of these types of groupings isn't always to affect policy-making or influence the institution of government, but try to create a closer association between their group and the dominant institution. While it's debatable whether one can use the Western term "interest groups" to describe such entities in China, they nevertheless exist, proliferate and must be discussed. In fact, they have demonstrably created a new space in which to redefine the conventional relationship between the Chinese state and society, or the dominant system and subsystem. Because this is an emerging phenomenon, scholars are still debating and defining what they have observed. Some scholars dare to borrow the Western term "interest groups,"³ while others are more reserved.

In the following analysis, I will discuss these actors and indicate which groups operate more like interest groups, as understood in liberal societies, and which don't fit that description at all, but that nevertheless "articulate their own group's interests." While these new actors might be somewhat influential in certain socioeconomic domains, they are less influential in the realm of foreign policy-making, as foreign policy-making in China remains a highly sensitive and opaque area controlled by a select number of party and government elites. Albeit less influential, the arrival of new actors in these so-called "interest groups" changes the landscape of China's foreign policy-making.

New and Not-So-New Actors

It is important to note that the PLA, which the Commissioners have asked me to elaborate on, is a notable old actor, well-entrenched in the party-state system. The embeddness of the PLA in the dominant system disqualifies it from being called an "interest group." However, it's worth observing the PLA's changing role, because its leaders have become more vocal about China's foreign relations. In fact, in recent months, the PLA has apparently trespassed on the Foreign Ministry's conventional role as the mouthpiece of foreign affairs. For example, at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in May 2010, a PLA officer called the U.S. a "hegemonic country." And in June 2010, two PLA officers engaged in a heated debate with Defense Secretary Robert Gates.⁴ It appears

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- Jakobson, Linda; Knox, Dean (2010) "New Foreign Policy Actors in China," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Policy Paper* No. 26, http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=410.

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- "America: PLA Finally Learns to Demonstrate its Muscles; MFA: Ask the Military about the Chengdu J-20," January 8, 2011, <http://news.backchina.com/viewnews-122118-big5.html> (in Chinese); "PLA Interferes in Foreign Affairs, Embarrassing Chinese Diplomats," *China News*, October 5, 2010,

that the PLA has become more autonomous in foreign affairs, asserting its realist attitudes toward international politics and defending what it believes to be China's national interests.⁵ It is intriguing how one can interpret the PLA's seemingly autonomous behavior in foreign affairs. Are these incidents an indication of a lack of bureaucratic coordination between the PLA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Or are they signs that the PLA is becoming more active in managing China's foreign affairs? This is worthy of continuous observation. With regard to the PLA, while I wouldn't directly suggest that it has become a kind of "interest group," it certainly has become more vocal in articulating a kind of "PLA" group interest.

In addition to the PLA, many quasi-state actors can be found outside the official channels of foreign policy making, such as state-owned enterprises (SOEs), energy companies, large financial institutions, local governments, and research institutes - all of which have increasingly demonstrated an intention to express their positions and articulate their interests on issues that have a bearing on China's foreign relations.

State-owned economic players have become more prominent because of China's support of marketization and the country's gradual integration into the global economic system. These actors may not directly lobby political elites to influence the shaping of foreign policy, but their actions do, at times, impact on China's foreign relations. For example, when China-made melamine-tainted milk products affected consumers in foreign countries, the state-owned dairy products company, Sanlu, triggered crises that had implications for China's relations with other nations.

Moreover, when Chinese energy companies develop global ambitions to operate in conflict-ridden African countries, such as Sudan, they play a role in the formation of China's foreign policy toward Sudan, and toward countries that have a stake in Sudan.

To a certain extent, the ways these economic actors operate is more comparable to the way interest groups operate in liberal democracies. Their economic importance gives them greater access to the locus of China's decision-making process. Their ability to provide more detailed and expert knowledge on certain vital economic issues also increases their value for decision-makers.

In interest group politics, scholars often discern two kinds of strategies that groups use to influence processes and policies. One is known as an inside

<http://news.creaders.net/headline/newsViewer.php?nid=446997&id=1013186&dcid=3> (in Chinese).

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- Shambaugh, David (2011) "Coping with a Conflicted China," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 7-27.

strategy or an access strategy. Employing this strategy, the interest groups seek to join the policy-making process, or at least be invited into the process. Through more direct communication with key decision-makers, the group seeks to set and mould China's foreign policy priorities. The second type of strategy often used is known as an outside strategy or a voice strategy. In this approach, the actors attempt to mobilize the wider constituents of a society who wish to join a collective effort to get the government to attend to their needs.⁶ Although it remains debatable whether China's most influential economic players fit precisely into the image of an "interest group," as the term is understood in liberal democracies, in China, these economic actors adopt certain inside strategies or access strategies in their efforts to affect China's foreign policy-making.

As for outside strategies or voice strategies, these approaches are often used by actors who lack the capacity to directly access decision-makers. This group of actors — which consists primarily of China's media and netizens — is the last group I will discuss today. The pluralization of media channels and the advent of the Internet have given Chinese citizens new avenues by which to obtain political information and understand politics. Cyberspace provides an important milieu for Chinese citizens to articulate their opinions and interests, thus creating diverse kinds of public spaces, online. However, these media and cyber-actors reside at the periphery of the policy-making establishment. I would not term these groups "interest groups." They are mere actors either articulating their individual interests or the interests they believe would have an impact on the public good. One should also note that most online interest articulation is fragmented and rarely becomes salient enough to catch the attention of key policy-makers.

Although there are incidences in which public opinion can affect certain public policies, this is less so in the highly sensitive domain of foreign policy. However, having said this, netizens do have a role to play in foreign policy. For example, in 2005, triggered by Japan's downplay of the extent of its wartime atrocities in China, more than 40 million Chinese netizens signed a petition to oppose Japan's attempt to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.⁷

It is nothing new for Chinese netizens to express nationalist sentiment and anti-Japanese views. Due to the fact that the communist party's legitimacy is partly dependent on nationalism, this is where netizens can have some impact on

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– Beyers, Jan (2004) "Voice and Access: Political Practices of European Interest Associations," *European Union Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 211-40; Kollman, Ken (1998) *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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– Jakobson, Linda; Knox, Dean (2010) "New Foreign Policy Actors in China," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Policy Paper* No 26, http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=410.

foreign policy, or at least put the party-state in a (difficult) situation where they need to respond.⁸ Netizens aren't interest groups, per se, but they can articulate group interests, inviting more netizens to join their collective elaboration of interests. However, it is hard to establish a link between online pressure and the government's foreign policy. It is more appropriate to say that policy-making elites can entertain online expression of interests, picking and choosing the ones they see as being most beneficial for the execution or conduct of foreign affairs. In the case of anti-Japanese sentiment, the elites can allow the anger to rise, signaling a kind of collective Chinese discontent toward Japan, while hoping that such discontent forces Japan to concede on certain issues.⁹ Or, if they see the need to utilize a more mature and rational strategy when dealing with their Japanese counterparts, elites can suppress anti-Japanese sentiment.

The Chinese government does realize the potential of netizens. The Foreign Ministry has opened up an online forum between government officials and Chinese netizens for the purpose of discussing certain foreign policy issues.¹⁰ In fact, leaders in liberal democracies are doing similar things. This simply suggests that China is using the pluralization of communication channels to allow the articulation of ideas and sentiments by certain group interests. In this case, hardly any interest group politics come into play. An intriguing question worthy of further observation is whether these actors routinely communicate with one another to find common ground or whether, by and large, they simply try to consolidate their own views.¹¹

Conclusions

A few conclusions can be drawn regarding the roles of various new and not-so-new actors on the landscape of foreign policy making in China. First, there is a proliferation of actors seeking to affect China's handling of foreign affairs. However, except for the PLA and some heavyweight state-owned agencies and companies, most groups lack access to key decision-makers who can determine

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- I wish to thank Dr. James Leibold for strengthening my argument here.

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- "Netizens Criticize Japan's Arrest of Chinese Fisherman," *People's Daily*, September 9, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7135579.html>.

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- "Int'l Department of CPC Opens to Netizens for First Time," *People's Daily*, April 1, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7338086.html>; "Chinese Netizens Talking Hearts on Internet," *Xinhua News Agency*, February 24, 2004, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/Life/88219.htm>.

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- Leibold, James, "Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion?" (unpublished paper).

the ultimate outlook of China's foreign policy. In the end, it is decision-making elites who can define and determine which groups can exist and enter the foreign policy-making process. Economic actors fare better than non-economic actors with regard to exercising an impact on foreign policy-making. To a certain extent, this mirrors the experiences of interest group politics in Western Europe and the United States.

Secondly, while the PLA and state-owned economic players aren't new, they have shown a capacity and willingness to become more autonomous by getting involved in international affairs. Their rising significance suggests the waning role of the Foreign Ministry and indicates a slow process of pluralization in China's foreign policy-making process.

Thirdly, I would like to emphasize, again, that these actors don't precisely fit into the image of "interest groups," as that term is understood in liberal democracies. While some observers have used the term "interest groups" in the Chinese context, strictly speaking, what they observe is the rise of government agencies or social groups seeking to articulate their perceived group interests. It is clear that more "group interests" are now being articulated in China than ever before, even in the highly-sensitive domain of foreign policy. But again, these groups aren't interest groups as understood in liberal democracies.

Finally, having noted that group interests have been exerting an increasing influence in China, the question remains as to whether key foreign policy makers have taken the interests of such groups into consideration. This is a difficult question to assess and answer. Foreign policy making is traditionally a black box, sometimes even in liberal democracies. I should caution that not much empirical evidence exists for us to establish too firm a link between the rising expressions of positions by these new actors and their actual impact on China's ultimate foreign policy choices. It is more prudent to say that the role of these actors lay in providing information and views, thus suggesting a potential way to influence China's foreign policy agenda or priorities.