CHINA IN SEARCH OF ‘LEGITIMATE’ GREAT POWER INTERVENTION

Assistant Professor Camilla T. N. Sørensen assesses the new approaches to the question of ‘legitimate’ great power intervention developing in the debate among Chinese International Relations scholars and in the current Chinese foreign and security policy. The paper draws on interviews with Chinese International Relations scholars conducted by the author in Beijing and Shanghai.
This working paper is written by Camilla T.N. Sørensen and published by ThinkChina.

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In this working paper, Assistant Professor Camilla T. N. Sørensen assesses the new approaches to the question of ‘legitimate’ great power intervention developing in the debate among Chinese International Relations scholars and in the current Chinese foreign and security policy. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the conference “China and the Challenges in Greater Middle East” held at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in Copenhagen on November 10, 2015, with ThinkChina, University of Copenhagen, as co-organizer. The paper draws on interviews with Chinese International Relations scholars conducted by the author in Beijing and Shanghai in February-April 2014 and October 2015.

Due to Beijing’s expanding global role and interests, it is no longer possible for China to follow its traditional ‘lay low’ [tao guang yang hui] strategy and the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention. Consequently, there is among Chinese International Relations scholars an intense debate on how China can protect and promote Chinese global presence and interests while at the same time continue to ‘stay within’ the principle of non-intervention. New concepts and approaches are developing as the debate progresses. An important example is the growing emphasis on the distinction between ‘intervention’ and ‘interference’ in the Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox. Several Chinese International Relations scholars hence stress that while ‘non-intervention’ continues to characterize the Chinese foreign and security policy approach, then Beijing to a higher degree and also more proactively has started to interfere in developments and conflicts in other states and in the international system. The current Chinese foreign and security policy reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention. This paper further examines the search for ‘legitimate’ great power intervention characterizing both the debate among Chinese International Relations scholars and the current Chinese foreign and security policy.

Chinese foreign and security policy in a changing – domestic and international – context

The point of departure is taken in two important questions about the further development in Chinese foreign and security policy. The first of these two questions is “how will Chinese foreign and security policy change as China’s role, interests and capabilities increase and become more global?” In recent years Chinese foreign and security policy has evolved in a contradictory manner with signs of a more assertive, even aggressive, Chinese foreign and security policy on the one hand and with signs of a more cooperative and constructive, even responsible, Chinese foreign and security policy on the other hand (Sørensen, 2015: 65-69). This gives the context for the second
question, which is “what policies have the highest and lowest likelihood of continuity in the years and decades ahead?” Or to put it in another way “what kind of Chinese foreign and security policy to expect under different conditions?” These are broad questions and therefore the focus below is on an aspect of Chinese foreign and security policy, where the implications of Beijing’s expanding global role, interests and capabilities are directly visible and also difficult for the Chinese leaders to deal with. That is, on China’s adherence to the principle of non-intervention, which is one of China’s key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines.1 It was, however, crafted in a different international environment in which China had few economic and security interests to protect outside its own borders (Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 1-4).

China’s globally expanding role and interests are in particular driven by its growing need for import of energy and raw materials in order to maintain domestic economic growth and stability, which continues to be first priority for the Chinese leaders. However, China’s globally expanding role and interests make it impossible to comply with the traditional ‘lay low’ [tao guang yang hui] strategy and the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention. Beijing increasingly has its own strong stakes in how domestic politics in other states develop and in how international conflicts and crises are managed and solved (Godement, 2013).

The pressure on the traditional ‘lay low’ strategy arises also from strong concerns in Beijing about living up to growing domestic expectations of how the Chinese leaders should more actively and directly protect and promote Chinese nationals, investments and activities abroad and in the process show willingness to demonstrate or even use China’s – now stronger – economic and military capabilities. This relates to growing domestic demands for (re)gaining international status and respect for China as a great power. Strong nationalist voices, in particular expressed online, spur such expectations and demands (Wang and Wang, 2014). The Chinese military, the PLA, has also increased the pressure on the Chinese leaders for seizing opportunities to try out the now improved Chinese power projection capabilities as seen in relation to the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen in early April 2015 (Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 15; Panda, 2015).2 Hence, domestic politics play into this as well, and the important point here is that in their efforts to deliver, the Chinese leaders will most likely effectively end the traditional Chinese approach – and policy – of non-intervention. Related to the domestic politics dimension, several Chinese International Relations scholars argue that Beijing is no longer so concerned about other states intervening in China, e.g. because of Tibet or Taiwan. China earlier insisted on the principle also as a way of self-protection, which today, with the development of a stronger and more self-confident China, appears no longer to be such a big concern.

Finally, the traditional ‘lay low’ strategy is challenged by the fact that China can no longer free-ride on the U.S. role as ‘the global police man’ guaranteeing international stability and other international public goods – the U.S. is no longer to the same degree willing nor able to do all the

1 The principles of non-intervention [bu ganyu] and non-interference [bu ganshe] are often used interchangeably by Chinese International Relations scholars and in official Chinese documents. As further discussed below, it seems, however, that a clearer distinction between and usage of the principles are developing these years.

hard work e.g. in the Middle East. As a consequence there are also growing international expectations and demands on China to take more responsibilities and play a more active role in managing and solving international conflicts and crises – be ‘a responsible stakeholder’ (Wang, 2011). In relation to this, it is interesting to note how several Chinese International Relations scholars highlight how Beijing fears – rather than sees it as a strategic opportunity – that the U.S. reduces its presence in the Middle East.

The important point here is that these – international and domestic – expectations and demands that are challenging the traditional ‘lay low’ strategy and the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention do not lead to or promote the same development in Chinese foreign and security policy; rather they pull in different directions.

Rethinking and reforming China’s key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines – the debate

Among Chinese International Relations scholars there is an intense debate on how China can protect and promote Chinese global presence and interests while at the same time continue to respect the principle of non-intervention; that is, how China can intervene – or interfere – in a ‘legitimate’ way. This debate on intervention/non-intervention is closely related to the ongoing debate among Chinese International Relations scholars on the ‘lay low’ strategy (cf. e.g. Zhu, 2010).

Chinese International Relations scholars participating in the debate on intervention/non-intervention tend to express the same frustration on widely different issues and cases, and it seems that a broad consensus is developing about the need to rethink and reform – few say “give-up” – the principle of non-intervention and develop a Chinese approach of ‘limited intervention’ [youxian ganshe] and ‘creative involvement’ [chuangzaoxing jieru], which could better serve Beijing’s expanding global role and interests (cf. e.g. Wang, 2012). However, most of the Chinese International Relations scholars also acknowledge that taking up such an approach and a policy that is not afraid to take sides and that favors particular domestic outcomes in other states is also very complicated and opens up whole array of new challenges (cf. Godement, 2013: 1-2). A key concern driving this debate therefore is how to become more actively and constructively involved in international affairs on the one hand and better protect and promote Chinese global interests on the other hand, while at the same time continue to respect the principle of non-intervention and not end up conducting foreign and security policy like the ‘hegemon’ (that is the U.S.) and risk creating more instability and chaos in the international system. This is not an easy puzzle to solve. Adding to the complexity is the key Chinese argument – or insistence – that China is a different kind of great power (than the U.S./the West) and does not intervene militarily and overthrow other regimes in order to protect and promote its own narrow interests. This relates to the Chinese distinction between the kingly (‘rule by virtue’) way [wang dao] and the tyrant (‘rule by force’) way [bo dao], which is central in the Chinese debate and in the Chinese perception of China as a great power; China of course acts the kingly way (cf. Zhu, 2010: 23-26).

One group of Chinese International Relations scholars, emphasizing the importance of China being ‘a responsible great power’ [fuzeren daguo] and of a positive international image of China, tends to promote stronger Chinese cooperation with other great powers and a more active Chinese role in
international – and regional – multilateral organizations. However, another group of Chinese International Relations scholars emphasizes the importance of advancing and protecting China’s globally expanding role and interests and argues for China to start more actively using its growing economic and military capabilities abroad. That is, for a more active, but also strongly unilateral, Chinese foreign and security policy. Following, China’s different balancing games, e.g. in the Middle East, where Beijing generally tries to keep friendly relations with everyone, are seen as ineffectual and therefore China needs to choose and more clearly take a stand focusing on protecting and promoting its own interests (cf. Godement, 2013). Related to this argument, some scholars like Prof. Yan Xuetong from Tsinghua University further argue that it is necessary for China to get rid of its principle of non-alignment (Yan, 2012).

The debate among Chinese International Relations scholars provides an important window in identifying and understanding emerging trends in the evolving Chinese foreign and security policy. However, before discussing the criteria for ‘legitimate’ great power intervention often highlighted by these scholars, it is useful to briefly examine the current Chinese foreign and security policy.

Rethinking and reforming China’s key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines – the policy

The development in Chinese foreign and security policy in recent years reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention. China has become deeper and more proactively involved in the politics of other regions, e.g. in the politics of the Middle East and of Africa, and Beijing to a higher degree also seeks to shape political developments in other states (cf. e.g. Wang, 2012). In relation to several international conflicts and crises the Chinese leaders have presented diplomatic suggestions and offered to play a mediating role, e.g. in relation to Sudan and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Beijing has been seeking to play a more active and constructive international role by strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other great and emerging powers and regional organizations, e.g. in relation to Iran and the Iranian nuclear crisis.

China’s commitment to – and engagement in – UN peacekeeping has also been further deepened. In September 2015 the Chinese President Xi Jinping held a speech at the general debate of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly announcing that China will join the new UN peacekeeping capability readiness system and even take the lead in setting up a permanent UN peacekeeping police squad, where China itself will establish a 8000 troops strong standby peacekeeping force. Xi Jinping further reported that China will establish a 10-year $1billion China-UN peace and development fund “to support the UN’s work and promote the multilateral cooperation cause” (Adler and Sidiropoulos, 2015; Xi, 2015). And lastly, indicating the growing Chinese emphasis on the importance and role of regional organizations, Xi Jinping announced that Beijing will provide $100 million of free military assistance to the African Union in the next five years to support the establishment of the long-awaited ‘African Standby Force’ and the ‘African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis’ (ACIRC) (Ibid.).

Following, Xi Jinping during his five-day African tour in early December 2015 announced the Chinese plan to build a logistics facility for its navy in the East African nation of Djibouti. This was
presented as a logical next step in the growing Chinese willingness to act as a protector and provider of regional security and development, specifically referring to the Chinese role in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and in the anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast (Page and Lubold, 2015). China clearly also has its own narrow interests establishing what is likely to become China’s first overseas military base and no matter whether it is called a military base or not, it is a clear departure from the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention and the long-held Chinese position that China – in contrast to the U.S. and other Western great powers – does not want to base its military on a long-term basis overseas.

There are also signs of a kind of Chinese ‘stick and carrot’ diplomacy, where Beijing has started to show increased willingness to use its now stronger economic and military strength to influence the domestic politics of other states and in order to protect and promote Chinese national economic and political interests, e.g. China’s use of commercial diplomacy means in several East Asian states. In relation to the maritime territorial disputes in East Asia the Chinese leaders have also increasingly been employing coercive diplomacy and military means. Lastly, there are cases, where Beijing continues to insist on the strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention, e.g. in relation to Syria. The ‘lesson from Libya’ and a general Chinese suspicion towards the Western, especially the U.S., motives for intervention are often included in the Chinese argumentation for the importance of upholding the strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention in general and for the Chinese position on the Syrian-conflict specifically. The more specific Chinese concern here is that the U.S. could use the ‘responsibility to protect’ [baohu de zeren] as an excuse to turn regime change into a new norm in international relations (cf. e.g. Godement, 2013).

To sum up. China has gradually developed a prudent and pragmatic case-by-case approach, which underlines how China’s position and policies on non-intervention, territorial integrity and sovereignty are conditional. This in itself is not new – the principle of non-intervention works as a key guideline for China’s diplomatic work and a major rhetorical tool, whereas there has always been a degree of flexibility in the actual conducted Chinese foreign and security policy regarding non-intervention. The important point here, however, is that the context and the conditions are changing as are the Chinese interests and instruments. Beijing now has a stronger role and influence in the international system and also has stronger economic, political and military force to put in play and this has clearly changed the importance and the implications of the Chinese intervention or non-intervention. Also, there are, as discussed above, growing expectations and pressures – domestically and internationally – for Beijing to proactively engage and interfere and not stay with the more passive and reactive way of the past.

**Great power intervention with Chinese characteristics – in the debate and in the policy**

As highlighted above, Chinese adherence to the principle of non-intervention is not synonymous with Chinese in-action, and both the debate among Chinese International Relations scholars and the current Chinese foreign and security policy provide clues about the evolving Chinese ‘management’ of the principle of non-intervention.

The typical Chinese way of “crossing the river by feeling for the stones” seems to best characterize the Chinese efforts to find tactical ways to deal with the many new expectations, demands and
interests facing Beijing domestically as well as internationally. While insisting that China will stay within the principle of non-intervention, certain criteria for ‘legitimate’ great power intervention are set up – that is, an intervention that does not break with the principle of non-intervention. However, the criteria then seem to be continuously adjusted and some criteria are given less importance while new ones are added. Hence, it is not so much the Chinese rhetorical support for – and emphasis on – the principle of non-intervention that is changing; rather it is the Chinese criteria for ‘legitimate’ great power intervention.

The main criterion for ‘legitimate’ great power intervention stressed by Chinese International Relations scholars and by Chinese diplomats is that there is a UN resolution in place and thus broad international support behind the intervention. This focus on the UN authorization relates to how Beijing seeks to guard the UN as the highest international authority – cf. the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s speech at the general debate of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (Xi, 2015). However, there are indications that a UN resolution is becoming less of an ultimate demand and focus seems to be shifting to the importance of an invitation or a request from the country in question. It is, however, unclear from whom the invitation is required – all groups in the country? This is not likely to happen, when there is a political crisis in the country. From the leading group? But then China would be taking side in the political crisis in the country. In relation to these questions, there are some Chinese International Relations scholars, who then emphasize the need for a request and for support to a Chinese intervention from the regional organization involved, e.g. from the African Union.

Another criterion often highlighted by Chinese International Relations scholars and where the importance is also reflected in the conducted Chinese foreign and security policy is the involvement of China’s own national interests whether it is economic interests, Chinese citizens, political or security interests. This criterion is also often related to the question of Chinese military capability and ability to intervene, where Chinese International Relations scholars often highlight how despite rapid increasing military spending for many years, China still needs many years to build the overseas military infrastructure and capabilities to project power globally.

Regarding the focus on the involvement of the Chinese military, it seems that Chinese International Relations scholars recently have started emphasizing and further specifying the distinction between ‘intervention’ and ‘interference’. As mentioned above, the principles of non-intervention [bu ganyu] and non-interference [bu ganshe] are often used interchangeably by Chinese International Relations scholars and in official Chinese documents, but maybe this is changing. New developments here include what looks like a more narrow definition of intervention, where it is only defined as ‘intervention’ if there is use of military instruments. This further implies that Chinese involvement or interference in another state’s economic and political development, playing a mediating role, seeking to actively participate in ‘nation-building’ etc. is no longer defined as ‘intervention’. Whether this more narrow definition develops into an official one remains to be seen, but the fact that several Chinese International Relations scholars mentioned it in interviews conducted in China in October 2015 at least underlines the strong urge in China to rethink and reform the principle of non-intervention. If there is a changing, more narrow, Chinese definition of (great power) intervention, then this opens up for a lot of ‘legitimate’ Chinese involvement and activities in other states and generally in the international system.
Summing up, what the Chinese International Relations scholars tend to underline when presenting their ‘way’ of intervention – the ‘legitimate’ way – is that the above mentioned criteria are fulfilled and that Chinese intervention – or interference – always includes and mobilizes all local forces or groups in the particular country. It is often emphasized how domestic groups need to lead the negotiation process and thus how outside forces such as China can only play an assistant role. Focus is on what Chinese International Relations scholars often term ‘the national interest’ [guojia liyi] of the particular country, which implies that China always seeks to take in the whole picture and the long-term view and not to take side or use military instruments to create or enforce stability.

As China gradually has integrated with – and expanded within – the international system, its foreign and security policy has become more subtle and sophisticated with different dimensions and areas and also with growing inconsistency between Chinese foreign and security policy principles and practice. Despite efforts from several of the Chinese International Relations scholars and diplomats to frame China’s growing and more proactive involvement in other state’s domestic affairs as something else than intervention and interference, there is no doubt that the current development in Chinese foreign and security policy involves making some fundamental choices about strategic priorities and old dogma and doctrines; there are limits to how long these can be stretched and creatively reinterpreted while still maintaining credibility.

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