

The Evolution, Characteristics and Challenges of Contemporary China's Diplomatic System^{*}

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The earliest form of the diplomatic system is having envoys or representatives posted overseas. But as the number of overseas mission increased, countries found themselves in greater need of a dedicated department of foreign affairs to serve their expanding interests. Soon, the department of foreign affairs became the key nexus of institutions connecting and leading all missions abroad. Article 41 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations stipulates that “All official business with the receiving State entrusted to the mission by the sending State shall be conducted with or through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the receiving State or such other ministry as may be agreed.”¹ Indeed, nowadays, the MFA is often a core component of the modern governmental system for coordinating domestic and international affairs as well as the hub and institutional guarantee for the overall national diplomatic system and processes. It is hence an integral element in the study of diplomacy.

Recently, however, the reputation of MFA has been called into question.² Some have gone as far as to brand it the “Ministry of

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Foreigners”³ or “Sell out Ministry”⁴, whilst others point to the declining role of diplomats in the 21st century.⁵ More specifically, some criticize the quality of Chinese diplomats for “lacking strategic vision and professionalism... [their] personality has been distorted by ‘translator diplomats’”.⁶ Such criticism can be explained in part by various misunderstandings of the nature and function of diplomacy. To a certain degree, however, the criticism also reflects the challenges and fundamental difficulties which diplomacy, especially the MFA, faces today. This article attempts to explore and track the evolution and characteristics within contemporary China’s diplomatic system and examine the challenges it currently faces.

I. THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA’S DIPLOMATIC SYSTEM

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The emergence and evolution of contemporary China’s diplomatic system reflects the relations between China and the outside world as well as the development of China’s modern system of government. In China, the diplomatic system is composed of various nodules, the most important of which is the MFA, the main institution responsible for diplomatic work. The MFA is comprised of permanent representative missions abroad, including diplomatic missions in the capitals of countries with which China has diplomatic relations as well as permanent representation in international governmental organizations, and consulate offices. It also performs a role in the training and selection of Chinese diplomats.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The MFA was one of the earliest ministries founded by the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). On

October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed; by November 8, the MFA of the Central People's Government was established. In order to mark a break with the humiliating nature of diplomacy established under the Republic of China government, Zhou Enlai insisted, "We must not rely on the old set of diplomats from the old government to run our diplomacy. We must 'start anew' and build a new diplomatic corps." According to this principle, the new diplomatic corps were recruited from three main groups: The first were sourced from officials within the foreign affairs group of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) who had engaged in foreign affairs before the founding of the PRC, officials who had been operating "underground" or on the united front work before the PRC had been officially established in 1949. The second group consisted of leaders and core administrators from within different military and administrative regions. The final group was comprised of graduates selected from liberal arts universities.⁷

The status and seniority of the MFA tends to vary around the world. In the PRC, however, the MFA has always been regarded as the first among all ministries within the State Council. Indeed, the first seven of China's foreign ministers who have assumed office to date are old revolutionaries who had participated in revolutionary work before 1949. Premier Zhou Enlai, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, also served as foreign minister for a total of nine years. Subsequent foreign ministers, however, have been predominantly members of the Politburo Standing Committee. The high political status of the foreign minister signifies the high status and importance of the foreign ministry in China's governmental system.

At the time of its creation, the MFA consisted of only 173 permanent staff. It was comprised of a general office, six regional operations divisions, and two committees specializing in policy consultation, treaty and law.⁸ With the establishment of ever more diplomatic ties and an increase in foreign affairs activity, the MFA has been expanding its scale and internal institutions ever since its founding in 1949. In the mid-1980s, not long after China's reform and opening up in 1978, for example, the number of departments

and bureaus of the MFA increased to twenty-one.⁹ Later, in 1991 when the Cold War ended, this number increased to twenty-four¹⁰ which increased again to twenty-nine by 2015.¹¹ Over the years, some departments have been gradually merged whilst others have been disbanded altogether. The significance of newly established departments in particular has also been expanding rapidly. To match these expansions, the personnel of the MFA has also increased significantly from more than 170 permanent staff at the time of its founding to over 5,000 permanent staff at present.

At the same time, the key functions and role of the MFA has also experienced change. Available sources show that the MFA had around nine predominant functions in 1991,¹² which increased to eleven in 1994,¹³ and again to nineteen by 2015.¹⁴ According to the Ministry's website, its basic duties, as of 2016, are to provide information and advice, handle foreign affairs on behalf of the state and government, implement government policy, and conduct research. Additionally, it also undertakes a number of other responsibilities, such as handling diplomatic etiquette and ceremonies, consular affairs, overseas Chinese issues, and issues related to international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation; interpreting for national diplomatic affairs, and translating diplomatic documents and official dispatches; organizing negotiations over treaties and agreements; managing foreign diplomatic and consular institutions in China; and leading diplomatic missions abroad and the offices of Commissioners in Hong Kong and Macao.¹⁵ These ever-increasing functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reflect China's rising international status and its growing engagement and responsibility in international affairs. At the same time, expectations for the MFA have also been growing.

Overseas Diplomatic Missions

Overseas missions appeared as some of the earliest forms of diplomatic institutions. Like many other countries in the world, China's overseas missions are situated within three main domains: as embassies in foreign capitals, as representatives in international organizations, and as overseas consulates or consulates-general.

Following its founding, the PRC first reached agreements with seventeen countries on mutual recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations. At this time, therefore, only seventeen Chinese embassies existed. By 1960, however, the number of embassies increased to more than fifty, reaching 111 by 1979. After the end of the Cold War, a number of additional countries gained independence and so the number of countries that had established formal diplomatic relations with China increased to 171 by 2009, when the PRC celebrated its 60th anniversary. As of the end of 2015, China has 165 embassies around the world and one representative office in the Palestinian state, as well as three representative offices in Haiti, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, which had no formal diplomatic relations with China.¹⁶

The PRC was excluded from all international governmental organizations before the resumption of its legal seat at the United Nations (UN) in 1971. Now, China is a member of all major international organizations and has eight permanent missions to the UN, including at its headquarters in New York, its offices in Geneva (including the World Health Organization), Vienna (including the International Atomic Energy Agency), the World Trade Organization, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the African Union. In addition, China has two representative offices at the headquarters of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the International Seabed Authority.

Although China does not have special regulations concerning the function and purpose of its overseas diplomatic missions, it is the MFA which is the *de facto* leader of these missions since they are institutionally affiliated with the MFA. According to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, there are five main functions of diplomatic missions. Specifically, these include, “representation”, “protection”, “negotiation”, “observation” and “development”.¹⁷ In the era of globalization, however, these functions appear to be weakening with the exception of representation and protection. With the rise of summit diplomacy, facilitating and ensuring exchanges and visits between the heads of state or government and

other high-level government officials has become an increasingly important function of China's overseas diplomatic missions.

Additionally, as the Chinese people grow ever curious and able to travel overseas, the role of consular protection has likewise expanded rapidly and has become an ever-integral part of China's diplomatic missions. In 2006, the MFA established the "Consular Protection Service" under the Department of Consular Affairs, which was specifically aimed at handling general issues of consular affairs and the protection of the lawful rights of overseas Chinese citizens and corporations. A year later, the Consular Protection Service was expanded to become a "Center for Consular Protection", headed by the director general of the Consular Affairs Department.¹⁸ By the end of 2015, China had established ninety-five consulates-general in more than forty countries. The growing status of this department reflects the Chinese concept of "governing for the people" and "putting people first" and has led to a growing public awareness of China's overseas operations. In 2015 alone, the MFA, embassies and consulates handled more than 80,000 cases of consular protection, dealing with approximately 235 cases per day, which amounted to one case every six minutes. In addition, they successfully rescued fifty-five kidnapped Chinese citizens and evacuated more than 6,600 Chinese compatriots from the war-torn regions of Yemen and the devastated earthquake-affected regions of Nepal.¹⁹

Selection and Training Mechanisms

Highly qualified and capable diplomats, who are politically loyal and professionally skillful, are key components of the overall operation and successful implementation of a country's foreign policy. Recruiting and training diplomats is one of the fundamental requirements for ensuring successful diplomacy. This domain, therefore, has become a salient part of diplomatic studies.

In the early 1950s, the MFA chose the Renmin University of China, the Beijing Foreign Languages School, and Peking University's Department of Oriental Languages as the training bases for its future diplomats. In 1955, the State Council approved the establishment of the China Foreign Affairs University, which

specifically trained diplomats for the MFA. In 1959, the Beijing Foreign Languages School merged with the Beijing Russian Institute to form the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, which was seen as the favored recruitment ground for future diplomats. Prior to the end of the Cold War, the vast majority of the MFA diplomats were chosen from these institutions.²⁰

After the Cold War, China began to accelerate its integration within the international community. However, as the first generation of China's diplomats began to reach the age of retirement, the government faced a growing need for a phased replacement program. From the early 1990s, therefore, the MFA began to develop a strict recruitment program based on the principle of "entrance examinations, fair competition, and selection on the basis of merit". Additionally, recruitment for the MFA has expanded to ever more colleges and universities across the country since the late 1990s. Applicants must first pass the national civil service examination before participating in the specialized examination process of the MFA. Only after passing both examinations can applicants secure a position within the MFA. In 2015, for example, the MFA planned to recruit 193 civil servants; 20 were recruited to administrative and technical positions whilst the remaining 173 were placed in diplomatic service. Candidates for the diplomatic corps were recruited from a wide variety of fields, including diplomacy, international relations, foreign language study, journalism, law, economics, finance, science, and engineering, whilst candidates for administrative and technical positions hailed from accounting, investment, economic, architecture, and project management backgrounds.²¹

In addition to expanding its recruitment bases and absorbing greater numbers of high caliber diplomats, the MFA has also taken measures to foster a more dynamic workforce, by enhancing the education, experience and knowledge of its diplomats. More than one hundred diplomats, who have demonstrated a high degree of aptitude in their work, are selected each year to participate in overseas study programs to develop their skills and knowledge bases. In the scope of long-term learning, this includes the pursuit of master and doctorate degrees. Young diplomats are encouraged

to participate in part-time and in-service study and training. Additionally, a number of high-level diplomats have been sent to local government departments within China to receive additional experience, which aims to enhance their understanding of China's domestic situation and government system from within. Finally, future ambassadors are also sought from local governments directly who, after training, are posted overseas.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the scale of its diplomatic institutions has grown continuously and significantly. The diplomatic mechanisms have become more comprehensive and the numbers of overseas diplomatic institutions have steadily increased. Moreover, the functions and responsibilities of China's diplomatic institutions have become more diverse and concrete whilst the quality, source, experience, specialization and diversification of its diplomats have become increasingly institutionalized. Such fundamental changes within the diplomatic mechanism therefore, provide a new prospective for the study of China's foreign relations and diplomatic practices in the contemporary era.

II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC SYSTEM

In an age when the world shares common diplomatic norms and diplomatic cultures, the components and fundamental functions of the diplomatic systems around the world should not, in theory, be very different from one another. These include, for example, the predominant functions of the MFA as a key node in the diplomatic communication system, as a policy advisor, and in the gathering, storing, and analysis of information. The MFA also exchanges information and ideas on a broad range of issues with other countries, and provides services for the needs of specific domestic constituencies.²² On the other hand, the diplomatic system can also be seen as a highly nuanced body of government, due to differences in history, society, culture and stage of economic development, which affect each state individually. Likewise, the diplomatic system in China is comprised of both common features of any modern diplomatic system and a highly distinct set of features, which are

unique to the Chinese case.

China's contemporary diplomatic system traces its origins back to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The Cold War context played a significant role in molding China's diplomatic system during its infancy phase. Moreover, since China's relationship with the international community has undergone significant change, its foreign policy and diplomatic system have changed accordingly. For instance, various departments within the MFA have been newly established, merged or suspended. Changes have also taken place in China's overseas diplomatic missions in regard to their funding, suspension, and restoration. China's diplomatic system can therefore be said to have both international features and its own Chinese characteristics.

China's diplomatic system is a key part of the overall system of national governance, otherwise known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics". A diplomatic system with Chinese characteristics is a key component of this national system. At the CPC Central Foreign Affairs Conference, held on November 28-29, 2014, Xi Jinping proposed to enrich and further develop China's "diplomatic theories and practice, and conduct diplomacy with salient Chinese features and a Chinese vision".²³ *People's Daily*, the flagship newspaper of the CPC, highlighted in an editorial on November 30 that "Chinese diplomacy must uphold the leadership of the CPC and China's system of socialism with Chinese characteristics." This is the first and foremost principle for China's diplomatic work.²⁴

The most remarkable feature of China's diplomatic system is the CPC's dominant role within it. China's diplomacy falls within the direct remit of the CPC and China's diplomatic system operates under a Party-driven system. Within this system, it is the section on diplomatic work of the political report to each CPC National Congress that serves as the fundamental blueprint and general principles for China's overall diplomatic work. Additionally, the CPC Central Committee also holds regular meetings with relevant government organs and ministries, such as the Diplomatic Envoy's Conference, Central Conference on Foreign Affairs, Conference on Diplomatic Work with Neighboring Countries, and Conference on Military Diplomacy, in order to strengthen the CPC's unified

ideological leadership over China's diplomacy. The Leading Group for Foreign Affairs, new leading groups formed after the Cold War, such as the Leading Group for National Security and the Leading Group for Maritime Rights and Interests, and the National Security Commission, serve as the core coordinating organizations of China's overall foreign policy and diplomacy under the CPC. Since the MFA falls under the jurisdiction of the

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CPC, furthermore, the selection and appointment of its senior diplomats comes under the umbrella responsibilities of the CPC Central Committee. The Party committee within the MFA ensures the Party's role in the guidance of all foreign affairs. Ambassadors and consuls-general serve not only as representatives of China, but also as Party secretaries of overseas missions.

The leading role of the CPC in China's foreign affairs is also considered one of the strengths of China's unique system of diplomacy. Whatever form this diplomacy takes, including people-to-people exchanges with Japan before China-Japan relations were normalized, economic diplomacy conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade (now known as the Ministry of Commerce) to serve China's economic development after the start of reform and opening up, military diplomacy conducted by the People's Liberation Army, and the ever-expanding cultural, public, sports, health, and environment diplomacy, are all integral components of China's comprehensive diplomatic system led by the CPC.²⁵ The well-known saying in China, "Foreign affairs is an important matter and authority belongs to the CPC Central Committee," is demonstrated in China's foreign policy making and implementation.

The leading role of the CPC Central Committee in China's diplomacy is not only revealed by the fact that the Party commands all diplomatic work but in that the Party has its own diplomatic organ – the International Department of the CPC Central Committee. The foreign relations of the CPC prior to the founding

of the PRC, the forerunner of PRC's foreign relations, cannot be underestimated. In the early years of the PRC, the CPC's cooperation with ruling communist parties of the Soviet Union, Eastern European block and other socialist countries formed the bedrock of China's interstate relations. Within this context, therefore, there had been no clear differentiation between Party and state affairs. When Wang Jiaxiang was the first ambassador of the PRC to the Soviet Union, he was simultaneously designated as the "representative of the CPC Central Committee" to "take up matters over interparty relations" with the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party led by Stalin.²⁶ Indeed the combination of state and Party diplomacy with foreign countries remains an important function and component of the PRC's diplomatic structure in the 21st century. It is therefore not surprising that the CPC Central Committee's international department remains the prime authority in guiding China's foreign relations in the contemporary era while retaining its role in fostering Party relations between the CPC and political parties in other countries of the world.²⁷

One of the fundamental strengths of this unity of the Party and state is reflected in China's summit diplomacy. Simply put, summit diplomacy is constituted and conducted predominantly by heads of state and government. In China, the president is not only the head of the Chinese state but also the general secretary of the Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The Chinese Constitution provides that "The President of the People's Republic of China, on behalf of the People's Republic of China, engages in activities involving state affairs and receives foreign diplomatic representatives...." This is largely a symbolic role in representing the country and enjoying the treatment of being a head of state in diplomatic activities according to modern diplomatic norms. While performing these representative roles, the head of state also retains *de facto* decision-making power as the general secretary of the Party, the leadership core of all affairs in China. The combination of the presidential role in the Party and state enhances the role of summit diplomacy in diplomatic protocol and diplomatic effectiveness.

The second characteristic unique to contemporary China's diplomatic system is the "political qualities first" principle used in

selecting and training Chinese diplomats. Upon the founding of the PRC, the new diplomatic corps was formed according to the principle of “starting anew” under the absolute leadership of the CPC and armed by Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The “political qualities first” principle, furthermore, operates under the leadership of the CPC and notes its diplomatic core as being an unwavering, loyal, disciplined and powerful extension of the Party’s power. In this sense, China’s diplomats are often referred to as “soldiers without uniform”.²⁸ The benchmark for Chinese diplomats – “firm in political stands, knowledgeable in policy, adept in diplomacy, and highly disciplined”, first put forward by Zhou Enlai, prioritized political qualities. The experience and expertise of senior diplomats, who had served in the Nationalist government and wanted to serve the new government, could be fully utilized. Though they could be employed as advisors or participate in the training of newly recruited diplomats, they could not become diplomats working on the diplomatic frontline.

The first wave of ambassadors dispatched abroad after the founding of the PRC in 1949 embodied this “political qualities first” principle. Twelve of the fifteen ambassadors appointed by the new government were selected from the PLA and were thus known as “general ambassadors”. Between 1955 and 1972 nine more generals served in this capacity.²⁹ Different from some Western countries, where the appointment of ambassadors tended to be awarded to political supporters, utmost priority was placed on the political merit in the appointment of Chinese ambassadors. Chinese diplomats were thus known as “ambassadors under the five-star flag” or “red ambassadors”.³⁰

The third Chinese characteristic of China’s diplomatic system is the significance of and dependence on translation and interpretation within the system. Indeed, the famous British diplomatist Sir Ernest M. Satow stated that “a thorough knowledge of at least one of the internationally used languages is essential.”³¹ But employing language ability alone, while a necessary requirement of all diplomats, is not itself a sufficient condition. In the immediate post-1949 era, China’s diplomatic corps, who were selected according to the principle of “starting anew”, suffered from a significant

lack, both in overseas experience and foreign language ability. As a result, translators ended up playing a major role in the day-to-day running of China's diplomatic missions and were soon considered vital elements in the successful operations of China's diplomatic affairs. The Department of Translation quickly became an integral wing of the MFA and given its work, developed a rigorous, high standard of foreign language capability.³² Today, however, the stress on foreign language competency has gradually diminished. Instead, overall aptitude and business acumen are more highly valued traits required in China's diplomats. Out of the eleven foreign ministers in the PRC-era consequently, only Huang Hua, Li Zhaoxing and Yang Jiechi possessed experience working in professional translation.

The dependence on translation and interpretation is a characteristic of the early stage of China's diplomatic system.

III. CHALLENGES FACING CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC INSTITUTIONS

In recent years, both scholars and the wider Chinese public have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of China's diplomatic institutions. In many cases, this can be attributed to a lack of basic understanding or indeed misunderstanding of the nature and function of Chinese diplomacy. More often than not, these criticisms reflect the existing challenges China's diplomatic institutions and their executive branches have already faced.

The first fundamental misapprehension stems from the confusion between "foreign policy" and "diplomacy". Foreign policy refers to the setting of future direction and policy formulation by the top-level decision-makers. Diplomacy, meanwhile, denotes the peaceful implementation of this policy in the empirical world. As seen from this distinction, the MFA is not the ultimate foreign policy decision-maker but rather an advisor and thus can only participate in the decision-making process in this capacity.³³ Likewise, the decision-making power of the foreign minister is only accorded to their status as an individual rather than as a function of the

power accorded to the position itself. In this sense, whether the information, intelligence and policy suggestions provided by the MFA will be accepted and be acted upon is not determined by the MFA but by a higher governmental authority, who itself makes foreign policy decisions.

The primary function of diplomacy is not policy formulation but rather its implementation, and this has been made clear by many scholars on diplomacy. For instance, the British diplomat, Harold Nicolson once pointed out that “Foreign policy is based upon a general conception of national requirements.... Diplomacy on the other hand, is not an end but a means; not a purpose but a method.”³⁴ Nation states have various needs and interests and so their means to realize foreign policy goals are equally multifaceted. Diplomacy is one important means to implement foreign policy but it is not the sole means of foreign policy implementation. Indeed, it is the decision-makers who direct the national foreign policy goals and decide which means to employ in order to achieve these goals. For example, they can choose military (non-peaceful) or diplomatic (peaceful) means, as well as legal or economic means. If a diplomatic means is chosen, it must be peaceful due to the fundamental non-violent nature of diplomacy itself. Though diplomats in contemporary China have been called “soldiers without uniform”, their diplomatic work is far removed from non-peaceful military means. Thus, it is inappropriate to evaluate diplomacy as “soft” or “hard”.

The second misconception of diplomacy among the general public is the tendency towards attributing foreign policy errors to diplomatic incompetence. Likewise, diplomatic errors can also be misconstrued as failures in foreign policy. Some people, furthermore, tend to relate diplomatic efficiency with national strength, especially military power. However, whilst national strength is indeed one of the many tools of diplomacy, it is by no means a precondition. China advocates equality of sovereign states, regardless of size or strength. It also opposes the hegemonic use of force by major powers. Some people, however, have criticized China’s diplomacy as being “too soft” or “lacking calcium”. They wrongly assert that “weak states are not in control of their

own foreign affairs” is an iron law in international relations and advocate a power diplomacy against the perceived ascendance of China’s national strength. However, these conceptions would not only contradict global diplomatic norms but also serve as a direct contradiction to the policy advocated by the Chinese government. If pursued, this form of diplomacy would lead China down the path to becoming a hegemonic world power, which China has itself constantly criticized in the realm of major-country diplomacy.

In addition to the difficulties arising from the various public misconceptions about foreign policy and diplomacy, China’s diplomacy in general and the MFA in particular are facing challenges from within the institutional structure. These challenges stem from two tendencies found in the modern diplomatic system: one is the horizontal “decentralization” of diplomatic power whilst the other is the vertical “concentration” of foreign policy decision-making power.³⁵

Concerning this horizontal decentralization, several trends of decentralization can be observed. Firstly, there has been increasing internationalization in the scope, content and frequency of China’s overseas liaison. Given the scope of this international reorientation, several governmental departments, whose missions and functions were domestically confined, have also experienced changes in their fundamental operations and responsibilities given their increasing involvement in foreign affairs. This has fostered deepening decentralization within China’s diplomatic structure. This internationalization trend has also been accompanied by a growth in the number of international cooperation departments within other ministries. Additionally, these departments have experienced increases both in personnel and budgets, commensurate with

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their role in the implementation of state policy. The department of international cooperation located within each ministry of the central government has in fact become a form of “mini foreign ministry” in their respective realm because it is these departments, rather than the MFA, that are managing China’s overall foreign policy implementation from within their own operational areas.

Increasing decentralization, however, is also reflected in China’s overseas diplomatic missions. Only half of the 5,000 diplomatic personnel who take positions in China’s overseas diplomatic missions are dispatched by the MFA. The ministries of commerce, defence, education and culture, for example, all operate offices in the major capital cities around the world. Whilst reporting directly back to their respective head offices in Beijing, these offices are also responsible for communicating and negotiating with their counterparts in the country of operation. Bypassing the formal diplomatic structure, therefore, they have become highly specialized and professional intermediaries in implementing China’s policy decisions overseas and contributed to the overall decentralization of foreign policy implementation.

As for the trend towards vertical centralization, China’s situation is no different from many other countries in the world. These changes are a result of an increase in the domestic significance of diplomacy and the rise of summit diplomacy in the contemporary era.³⁶ In China, this trend is manifested by the increasingly important role of the various leading groups in charge of foreign affairs within the CPC Central Committee. Indeed, since the 1990s, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has not held a position in the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, which is the core decision-making body in China. Within the Chinese diplomatic system, therefore, this can be seen as a significant sign of the decline in both power and status of the MFA.

The centralization and decentralization changes within China’s diplomatic system pose significant challenges to the overall coordination function of the MFA. At present, the main functions of MFA include organizing and coordinating China’s fulfilment of international accords and agreements, guiding and coordinating the foreign affairs of different ministries of the State Council and local

governments, and managing and coordinating foreign affairs issues related to national security.³⁷ However, as the only department with a historical mandate to link the external and domestic spheres of government, the MFA has also faced numerous challenges to its authority. These have entailed the question of how to handle the relationship between global diplomatic norms and the set of characteristics that are unique to China's diplomatic system. Additionally, there are issues related to how to balance inter-Party and inter-state relations, and how to coordinate the wide range of government departments that manage China's foreign relations in their own specialized areas. Since there is neither political and legalistic clarity nor institutional mechanism regarding such questions, the future for China's MFA is uncertain.

In response, some scholars have proposed the establishment of a "national diplomatic system"³⁸ whilst others have called for "whole government diplomacy".³⁹ In recent years, the CPC Central Committee has established a number of coordination groups related to foreign policy. The state councillor in charge of foreign affairs has called for "balanced considerations, overall planning, unified command and coordinated implementation" in China's overall diplomatic work and requested "the central and local governments, non-governmental organizations and all foreign policy-related agencies to work together to form synergy, with each performing their respective functions".⁴⁰ Whilst this could definitely help propel China towards embracing the notion of "whole government diplomacy", it alone cannot be expected to resolve the overall planning and coordination problems which are currently plaguing China's diplomatic system. The key to solving such problems, however, lies not in establishing ever more coordination groups but, rather, in facilitating and streamlining inter-agency relations and in improving overall policy coordination. If left unattended, the plurality of agents involved in the foreign policy process could easily overwhelm China's diplomatic system, as the famous saying goes, "Too many cooks spoil the broth."

Whether a "national diplomatic system" were to be established or not, the function and role of the MFA within this new "whole government" diplomatic system would be somewhat uncomfortable.

Whilst the essence of diplomacy is the peaceful implementation of foreign policy, the rise of China's economic power has inflated the national confidence of the Chinese public, mostly in reaction to issues concerning China's external environment. Under such circumstances, it has become increasingly difficult for the MFA to balance the traditional form of diplomacy with others such as military and legal means. In other words, the MFA has found it increasingly urgent to foster a peaceful international environment for China's domestic economic growth, and maintain stable and peaceful relations with China's neighboring countries while avoiding domestic criticism for being "too soft" and "lacking calcium".

The second challenge comes from the function of diplomacy in China as being the predominant conveyer for the policy of the CPC Central Committee. As the scope of China's diplomatic field widens, its diplomatic corps are becoming increasingly specialized. These phenomena can be seen across a wide array of spheres, including but not limited to sustainable development, global health, environmental protection, biodiversity, climate change, clean energy, nuclear security, terrorism prevention, free trade, economic diplomacy, financial security and the fight against transnational crime. Within these spheres, the degree to which the staff of the MFA possesses the relevant expertise to effectively address and implement policy is questionable. As other governmental departments become ever more deeply integrated and active in the implementation of foreign policy relevant to their fields, the role of the MFA itself is reduced to that of a "logistical coordinator",⁴¹ which exists only in assisting the work of other governmental departments. The Chinese MFA is, of course, not a unique case in this regard but rather an embodiment of a typical issue facing MFAs around the world.

The third challenge stems from the function of the Chinese MFA in policy consultation. The MFA's remit includes investigating and researching international issues that are of overall and strategic significance, studying and analyzing important diplomatic, political, economic, cultural and security issues, and providing policy and strategic advice to the CPC Central Committee and the State

Council and reporting to the CPC Central Committee and the State Council over important foreign trade, economic cooperation, foreign economic aid, culture, military assistance, military trade, education, science and technology, external public relations, and overseas Chinese issues, in light of China's overall diplomatic structure". But, as ever more ministries and government agencies become involved in the foreign affairs process and began to exert an influence on Chinese foreign policy, a fundamental question surfaces, that is, when the MFA's policy line differs from other ministries, whose and what interests does the Ministry truly represent: the Chinese people or other nation states? Indeed, it is such questions that have given rise to the dubbing of the MFA as the "Ministry of Foreigners" or the "Ministry of Treason". Similar questions include, whom does the MFA negotiate with in implementing Chinese foreign policy: its international counterparts or its peers within the Chinese government? Who is regarded as a priority in China's public diplomacy: the Chinese public or the international public?

The fourth challenge concerns the functions of the MFA in releasing information on important diplomatic events and elaborating upon Chinese foreign policy". This function distinguishes modern diplomacy from old diplomacy, and showcases major changes in contemporary Chinese diplomacy from a closed, secret style to a more open and accessible system. Since 1982, foreign policy press conferences have become an institutionalized feature of the MFA system of accountability. Such press conferences serve as a window into the world of Chinese diplomacy, and both the media and public expect the Chinese government to provide timely and accurate information on its work. Indeed, other ministries then realized the importance of press conferences, and established their own systems. This also helps to highlight those areas in which MFA often lack information or understanding. Indeed, records of the MFA press conferences show that the spokesperson of the MFA responded to questions from the media by saying that it "does not have information" on a certain issue or to "please refer to other ministries" on over 300 occasions from 2010 to 2015. However, as modern technology grows ever

sophisticated, particularly in terms of mobile technology, the role of press conferences themselves has begun to be questioned. In the future, it may be viable that such technologies would allow direct communication between the government and citizens without the needs for formal, institutionalized events, such as the press conferences. All this information, and more, would instead be available at the touch of a button.

Furthermore, as the scope of foreign affairs taking place in other governmental departments and ministries grows, they themselves become a “Foreign Ministry” of their special domain. Thus, the fundamental existence and future work of the MFA itself is coming under greater scrutiny. This is by no means an exaggerated claim to make; studies have shown that the “modern” diplomatic system had existed for about 200 years before the MFA formally separated from other department to become an independent ministry dedicated solely to foreign affairs.⁴² Consequently, the security and longevity of the future role of the MFA is far from guaranteed.

However, one need not worry about the future of diplomacy, because it continues to perform an indispensable role in world politics in a globalized age.⁴³ As a matter of fact, diplomacy is currently undergoing a revival;⁴⁴ and its role in the government is becoming undeniably more important. But, this does not necessarily mean that the MFA, the core of China’s modern diplomatic system, will always remain equally important. Under various pressures and criticism, what the MFA must do is not just to expand both its

The MFA must keep pace with the modern times and face up to the challenges.

personnel and funding, but also to keep pace with the modern times, to face up to the challenges through innovation and restructuring, and redefine its functions. Only by so doing will the MFA be able to find a strategic position in the rejuvenated environment of contemporary China’s diplomacy.

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