

# That Is *Not* Intervention; That Is Interference with Chinese Characteristics: New Concepts, Distinctions and Approaches Developing in the Chinese Debate and Foreign and Security Policy Practice

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## Abstract

There is among Chinese international relations scholars an intense debate about how China can protect and promote Chinese global presence and interests while at the same time continue to adhere to the principle of non-intervention. New concepts, distinctions and approaches are developing as the debate progresses. The current Chinese foreign and security policy practice reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention with different degrees and types of intervention. This article explores the search for “legitimate great power intervention” characterizing both the debate among Chinese international relations scholars and the current Chinese foreign and security policy practice, and uses this case as the departure point for a more general discussion of the drivers of change – and continuity – in Chinese foreign and security policy.

**Keywords:** China; Chinese foreign and security policy; non-intervention; legitimate great power intervention; evolving debate and practice

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Due to Beijing’s expanding global role and status as well as its globally expanding strategic and commercial interests, it is becoming increasingly difficult for China to follow the traditional, rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention. Consequently, there is among Chinese international relations scholars an intense debate about how China can protect and promote Chinese global presence and interests while at the same time continue to adhere to the principle of non-intervention. New concepts, distinctions and approaches are developing as

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the debate progresses, enabling Beijing gradually to move beyond the constraints of a rhetoric rooted in firm and inflexible stands. An important example is the growing emphasis on the distinction between “intervention” (*ganyu* 干预) and “interference” (*ganshe* 干涉) in the Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox. Several Chinese international relations scholars 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.<sup>1</sup> The current Chinese foreign and security policy practice reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention.

This article explores the search for “legitimate great power intervention,” characterizing both the debate among Chinese international relations scholars and the current Chinese foreign and security policy practice, and uses this case as the departure point for a more general discussion of the drivers of change – and continuity – in Chinese foreign and security policy. In the current Chinese foreign and security policy, there are different degrees and types of intervention. The main ambition is to explore the context for *why* this is the case and further *how* it calls for a thorough rethinking and reframing of the principles and guidelines behind Chinese foreign and security policy, resulting in new and sophisticated concepts and distinctions such as the above-mentioned one between intervention and interference in the Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox.

Changes in foreign and security policy principles and guidelines do not take place often or easily in China. There is what Lowell Dittmer has termed “a principled consistency” that is part of China’s projected national great power self-image.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of new principles is therefore often a slow process and is the result of a long line of negative or disappointing foreign and security policy experiences, which underline and make it politically acceptable that the current principles and guidelines have exhausted their practical applicability and that changes are needed. Such a political awareness process is accompanied by a more pragmatic experimenting line in Chinese foreign and security policy practice and an intensifying and more vigorous scholarly debate seeking out feasible and legitimate alternative interpretations of the current principles and guidelines as well as new principles and guidelines. Concerning its foreign and security policy, China is at a stage of such pragmatic experimenting and intensified debate. Specifically on the principle of non-intervention, an authoritative new line has not yet emerged, making it possible to pursue several new initiatives and approaches simultaneously. This way, exploring the debate among Chinese international relations scholars on how to deal with the new challenges that are gradually undermining China’s traditional, rather strict interpretation of the principle

1 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

2 Dittmer 2010, 41.

of non-intervention also provides a window into Chinese foreign and security policy decision-making. Although Chinese international relations scholars are one step removed from Chinese foreign and security policy decision-makers, in many cases they provide analyses and advice to the Chinese leadership, participate in high-level seminars and so forth. Hence they are privy to debates and discussions that occur prior to decisions being made, and are therefore often well positioned to articulate some of the experiences, arguments and logic that determine China's evolving foreign and security policy practice.<sup>3</sup> This is also important because of the way that Beijing is increasingly active in seeking to influence and shape international debates, norms and practices, for example on peacekeeping, peacebuilding and mediation. Chris Alden and Daniel Large specifically argue that Beijing, by more actively promoting its interpretation of the concept of "liberal peacebuilding," has begun a process of reframing established international norms on security and development in order to make these more in line with Chinese approaches and core interests.<sup>4</sup>

The article proceeds in four main steps. The first step sets the scene by briefly outlining the ongoing developments in – and the challenges facing – Chinese foreign and security policy. Then follows a critical overview of the debate among Chinese international relations scholars about whether and how to rethink and reform China's key foreign and security policy principles and guidelines. In the third part follows an examination of the more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention in general and in relation to specific cases. In the fourth and final section, the previous sections are taken as the departure point for a more general discussion of the drivers of change – and continuity – in Chinese foreign and security policy. The article draws on meetings and interviews with Chinese international relations scholars conducted by the author in Beijing and Shanghai in February–April 2014 and October 2015, as well as on relevant articles, essays and commentaries from Chinese international relations scholars.

### **Setting the Scene: Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in a Changing – Domestic and International – context**

The point of departure is taken from discussion of 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, status, 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

3 Scobell and Harold 2013, 114–15.

4 Alden and Large 2015.

hand.<sup>5</sup> 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 can we expect under different conditions?” These are broad questions, and therefore the focus below is on an aspect of Chinese foreign and security policy in which the implications of Beijing’s expanding role, status, interests and capabilities are directly visible and also difficult for the Chinese leaders to deal with, i.e. on China’s adherence to the principle of non-intervention, which is one of China’s key foreign and security policy principles crafted in the 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

China’s expanding role and interests globally 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 *the* first priority for Chinese leaders. However, China’s expanding role and interests globally make it increasingly challenging to comply with not only the traditional, rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention, but also the “low profile” (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) strategy that Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 put in place in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Beijing increasingly has its own strong stakes in how the domestic politics of other states develop and in how international conflicts and crises are managed and solved, and likewise is facing more pressures and incentives to assume great power responsibility and leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Domestic politics play into this as well. The domestic pressures especially arise from strong concerns in Beijing about living up to growing expectations of how the Chinese leaders should more actively and directly protect and promote Chinese citizens, investments and activities abroad, and in the process show willingness to demonstrate or even use China’s – now stronger – economic and military capabilities.<sup>9</sup> In the past decade, Chinese citizens working in such countries as Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria, Libya and Yemen have been kidnapped, killed or have had to be quickly evacuated in order to prevent such things from

5 See, e.g., Zhu and Peng 2015; Sørensen 2015, 65–69. There is debate in the literature on Chinese foreign and security policy on whether it makes sense to characterize Chinese foreign and security policy behaviour, especially since 2008, as aggressive – see, e.g., Johnston 2013; Friedberg 2014. Likewise in the same literature there is debate on what a responsible great power foreign and security policy behaviour looks like and whether China is increasingly conducting such behaviour – see, e.g., Zhu and Peng 2015; Fung 2015, 418–19.

6 The principles of non-intervention (*bu ganyu*) and of 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 is developing in these years.

7 Part of Deng’s 28-character guidelines for Chinese foreign and security policy. These are to “observe patiently” (*lengjing guancha*), “respond sensibly” (*chenzhuo yingfu*), “consolidate our footing” (*gonggu zhenjiao*), “be skilful in hiding capacities and biding time” (*taoguang yanghui*), “guard weakness” (*shanyu shouzhao*), “never take the lead” (*juebu dangtou*), and “take proper initiatives” (*yousuo zuowei*). These guidelines came into being following the end of the Cold War, when China faced tremendous diplomatic challenges and great uncertainties – see, e.g., Xu and Du 2015, 254.

8 For an overview of Chinese analyses, see Godement 2013. See also Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou 2014, 1–4.

9 Su 2009; Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou 2014, 13–14.

happening.<sup>10</sup> This relates further to growing domestic expectations of (re)gaining international status and respect for China as a great power. Strong nationalist voices, in particular expressed online, spur such expectations.<sup>11</sup> In the literature on Chinese nationalism, there is often a distinction between state-led nationalism and popular nationalism, followed by debate on what leads what.<sup>12</sup> However, it does not make much analytical sense to divide it this way. Rather, nationalism is to be seen as the most important glue between the party-state and Chinese society. As Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell argue “With the fading of the CCP’s utopian ideals, nationalism remains the party’s most reliable claim to the people’s loyalty.”<sup>13</sup> The party-state has long used nationalism to ensure domestic social and political stability, arguing that only a united China led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can regain China’s rightful great power position and thus resist outside forces seeking to keep China weak. Such use of nationalism has opened up legitimate room for activism and mobilization in Chinese society.<sup>14</sup> Nationalism therefore has developed into a two-edged sword. On the one hand, Chinese leaders can use nationalism to mobilize the Chinese population, aiming to put pressure on other states and direct focus away from their own weaknesses or mistakes. On the other hand, this also implies the development of higher nationalist ambitions and expectations for the Chinese leadership to act – and not act – in certain ways in Chinese foreign and security policy that are difficult to control or shut down. For example, the participants in demonstrations often rally behind signs stating that “patriotism is not a crime” (*aiguo wuzui* 爱国无罪) and carry emblems of state-sanctioned patriotism such as pictures of fallen martyrs.<sup>15</sup> It is not that concerns about not wanting to appear weak or give into external demands in the light of strong nationalist ambitions and expectations domestically dictate Chinese foreign and security policy. However, such concerns come into play in varying degrees of importance relative to other concerns. Specifically in conflicts related to Chinese territorial demands or other issues strongly related to Chinese nationalism and history, the Chinese leadership has become more sensitive, seeking to avoid being perceived domestically as soft and passive.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the growing nationalist sentiment in Chinese society and the resulting constraining influence on Chinese foreign and security policy are unintended consequences of the strategy that the CCP has used – and still uses – to ensure their own domestic legitimacy and to mobilize societal resources for regime security.

The Chinese military, the PLA, has also increased pressure on Chinese leaders to seize opportunities to try out the now-improved Chinese power projection

10 See Page 2016.

11 Wang and Wang 2014.

12 See, e.g., Zhao 2013.

13 Nathan and Scobell 2012, 33.

14 See, e.g., Wallace and Weiss 2015, 404.

15 *Ibid.*, 408.

16 E.g. Zhou 2016, 881; Moore 2014, 236.

capabilities, as seen in relation to the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen in early April 2015.<sup>17</sup> Hence, there are certain domestic pressures and interests that come into play as well. Related to the domestic dimension, several Chinese international relations scholars argue that Beijing is no longer so concerned about other states interfering in China, for example because of Tibet or Taiwan. China earlier insisted on the principle of non-intervention also as a way of self-protection, which today, with the development of a stronger and more confident China, appears no longer to be such a big concern.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the low profile strategy is challenged by the fact that China can no longer free-ride on the US role as the global policeman guaranteeing international stability and other international public goods – the US is no longer to the same degree willing or able to do all the hard work, for example in the Middle East. This relates to China's growing global status: China is now regarded as a great power and, as a consequence thereof, there are also growing international expectations and demands on China to take on greater responsibility and play a more active role in managing and solving international conflicts and crises, i.e. to be a responsible stakeholder.<sup>19</sup> In connection with 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 US will reduce its presence in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> The Chinese hence seem rather ambivalent and uncertain about China's great power status and about taking on the role and responsibilities globally that follow.<sup>21</sup>

To sum up: the important point here is that these above-mentioned international and domestic expectations and demands that are challenging the traditional, rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention and the low-profile strategy neither lead to nor promote the same development in Chinese foreign and security policy; rather they pull in different directions.

Adding to these reactive drivers, there are also signs of a more ambitious Chinese agenda coming into play, characterized by efforts to proactively use Chinese contributions to and activities intended, for example, for international peacekeeping, peacebuilding and mediation in order to promote and substantiate great power status and responsible great power reputation for China. Further, the

17 Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou 2014, 15; Panda 2015. The 2013 Chinese Defense White Paper for the first time underlined the protection of overseas energy resources and Chinese nationals overseas as a major security concern and as a task for the Chinese military – see “The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces,” Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, April 2013.

18 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 17 April 2014. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

19 Wang, Jisi 2011.

20 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Peking University, 28 February 2014. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

21 See also Zhu and Peng 2015.

ambition is to gradually increase China's leading role and influence in relevant international and regional institutions, hereby improving China's ability to influence and shape international norms and rules, for example Beijing's aim is to have a Chinese official heading the UN peacekeeping office within the next few years.<sup>22</sup>

### Rethinking China's Key Traditional Foreign and Security Policy Principles and Guidelines

As mentioned above, there is an intense debate among Chinese international relations scholars about whether and how to rethink and reform China's key traditional foreign and security policy principles and guidelines. By further exploring the different approaches and understandings among Chinese international relations scholars, an important window into identifying and understanding emerging trends in the evolving Chinese foreign and security policy practice opens.<sup>23</sup>

The debate among Chinese international relations scholars circles around the question or challenge of how China can protect and promote Chinese global presence and interests while at the same time continue to respect the principle of non-intervention, i.e. how China can intervene in a legitimate way.

Chinese international relations scholars participating in the debate on intervention/non-intervention tend to express the same frustration on widely different issues and cases. 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 ganyu* 有限干预) and “creative involvement” (*chuangzaoxing jieru* 创造性介入), which could better serve Beijing's globally expanding role, status and interests. Wang Yizhou 王逸舟 from Peking University, who coined the concept “creative involvement,” defines it as a new and positive attitude and a new direction that calls on China to play a more active role and become voluntarily involved in international affairs.<sup>24</sup> While Wang argues that the development towards creative involvement in Chinese diplomacy reflects innovative responses to the new challenges facing China, he also stresses that it does not contradict the non-intervention principle. He specifies that the core of the non-intervention principle is that a state's *significant* internal affairs – its political system, security arrangements, mode of governance, and choice of leaders – are to be decided by its own people. If another state plays a *constructive* role towards this end, its involvement is not to be considered as a breach of non-intervention.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, creative involvement does not go against China's traditional diplomatic principles but

22 Page 2016; Fung 2015.

23 See, e.g., Zhu Liqun 2010, 57; Alden and Large 2015, 126–27.

24 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Peking University, 28 February 2014. See also Wang, Yizhou 2011, 2012.

25 Ibid.

rather is an *enrichment* of them. Moreover, Wang stresses that creative involvement is different from the US style of interventionism because it builds on a full exploration of all possible diplomatic means and a prudent approach towards the use of force.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, the development and popularity of new concepts such as “limited intervention” and “creative involvement” reflect how among Chinese international relations scholars a loose pragmatic consensus is developing. The bottom line is that the principle of non-intervention is still very important, especially rhetorically, but Beijing in order to safeguard China’s national interests has to adapt its foreign and security policy practice following the concrete situation. As stressed several times, China cannot afford to “mechanically” (*jixiehua* 机械化) take a position for non-intervention; rather its practice needs to evolve constantly.<sup>27</sup> Many differences remain, for example on the question of the conditions under which China should get involved – what does it take?<sup>28</sup> In this regard the debate on the principle and practice of non-intervention reflects and links up with other more general debates among Chinese international relations scholars, for example on China’s overall foreign and security policy strategy and China’s role in and approach to the Western-led international system.<sup>29</sup>

One group of Chinese international relations scholars, emphasizing the importance of China as a “responsible great power” (*fuzeren de daguo* 负责任的大国) 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.<sup>30</sup> However, another group of Chinese international relations scholars emphasizes the importance of protecting and advancing China’s growing global role and its globally expanding strategic and commercial interests, and argues that China needs to start more actively using its growing economic and military capabilities abroad, i.e. pursue a more active, but also strongly unilateral, Chinese foreign and security policy.<sup>31</sup> Following on from this, China’s different balancing games, for example 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 strategic and commercial interests.<sup>32</sup> Related to this argument, some scholars like Yan Xuetong 阎学通 from Tsinghua University, further argue that it is necessary for China

26 Ibid., see also Chen 2016, 358.

27 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 17 April 2014. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

28 Ibid., see also Chen 2016, 360.

29 See Zhu, Liqun 2010; Xu and Du 2015.

30 See, e.g., Wang, Jiangbo 2013; Wang, Yizhou 2011.

31 See, e.g., Li, Jiang 2015; Yan 2014.

32 See Godement 2013.



to get rid of its principle of non-alignment.<sup>33</sup> Hence, while agreeing on the need for a more flexible approach and an “adjustment” (*tiaozheng* 调整) of the principle of non-intervention, these different groups do not agree on the condition for legitimate or “rightful” (*hefa* 合法) intervention or on the specific intervention approaches and tactics that Beijing should adopt.

The critique supporting the call for adjusting the non-intervention principle and adopting a flexible stance is that a passive, reactive and wait-and-see approach, where Beijing is “burying its head in the sand as an ostrich” when dealing with international challenges and conflicts, harms Chinese national interests and imposes serious limits on Beijing’s efforts to safeguard Chinese citizens and economic investments and activities in various countries and regions.<sup>34</sup> Some Chinese international relations scholars further highlight how Beijing’s “no strings attached” approach to trade, aid and investments has not provided Chinese companies and other Chinese stakeholders with any benefits or any kind of preferable treatment in places such as Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria or Myanmar.<sup>35</sup> However, most of the scholars also acknowledge that taking up an approach and a policy that is not afraid to take sides and that favours particular domestic outcomes in other states is very complicated and opens up a whole array of new challenges.<sup>36</sup> A key concern is also to avoid attempts to pursue regime change under the cover of humanitarian intervention and the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) framework – a concern that has increased since the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, which by many Chinese international relations scholars is seen as the result of the Western powers taking advantage of the UN mandate to ensure regime change in Libya.<sup>37</sup> In response – and in an effort to try to shape the evolving international debate and norms on R2P more in line with Chinese preferences – some scholars have proposed the new concept of “responsible protection” (*fuzeren de baohu* 负责任的保护). Here the focus is on making civilian protection interventions more accountable and proportionate, which, among other things, requires that the different groups directly affected have ownership of, and agency in, defining and pursuing their own solutions according to their circumstances, and then Chinese and other external assistance adjust to these.<sup>38</sup> A unified standard for peacebuilding is therefore not possible. In addition, the scholars stress the importance and the efficacy of economic development and growing and inclusive prosperity as central in

33 Yan 2014.

34 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015. See also Chen 2016, 352, 367.

35 See, e.g., Xie 2010.

36 Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015. See also Godement 2013; Ren 2013.

37 Ibid. See also Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou 2014, 7.

38 See, e.g., Ruan 2012; Alden and Large 2015, 135.

ensuring peace, cf. the concept of “development peace” as alternative to the concept of “liberal peace.”<sup>39</sup>

The central worry among Chinese international relations scholars therefore is how China can become more actively and constructively involved in international affairs on the one hand and better protect and promote Chinese global strategic and commercial interests on the other hand, while at the same time continuing to respect the principle of non-intervention and not end up conducting foreign and security policy like the “hegemon,” i.e. the Western powers led by the US, 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 and does not intervene militarily and overthrow other regimes in order to protect and promote its own narrow national interests. This relates to the Chinese distinction between the kingly (“rule by virtue”) way (*wang dao* 王道) and the tyrant (“rule by force”) way (*ba dao* 霸道), which is central in the Chinese debate and in the Chinese perception of China as a great power; China of course acts in the kingly way.<sup>40</sup> This distinction and self-image are as indicated above more difficult to uphold in practice as Chinese strategic and commercial interests expand. Recent studies have hence found that how China’s identity-related concerns play out in concrete cases is a key causal variable in explaining China’s deployment decisions with regard to UN peacekeeping operations, in which Beijing in particular is willing to take on foreign and security policy activities that are consistent with China’s own self-perceived role in world politics.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, there seems to be a growing agreement among Chinese international relations scholars on the need to draw a distinction between principles and practice, where Beijing has to be more flexible in foreign and security policy practice engaging selectively in the domestic affairs of other states while adhering in diplomatic rhetoric to the principle of non-intervention. That is to say, both choices of selective involvement and non-intervention are possible and available options, and the question of which one is preferable then depends on the concrete case, for example if there are strong Chinese national interests and Chinese citizens involved and available Chinese capabilities.<sup>42</sup>

Such pragmatism and case-by-case approaches are also guiding recent efforts among some Chinese international relations scholars to emphasize and further specify the distinction between intervention and interference. Neither in Chinese official policy statements nor in the Chinese international relations literature is there any precise definition of which foreign and security policy actions constitute intervention and interference in another state’s domestic affairs. Specifically, the line between intervention, interference and legitimate foreign

39 See Alden and Large 2015, 135.

40 See Zhu, Liqun 2010, 23–26; Dittmer 2010, 40.

41 See, e.g., Fung 2015.

42 See also Chen 2016, 356–360.

and security policy practice has not been clearly defined, and the principles of “non-intervention” (*bu ganyu* 不干预) and “non-interference” (*bu ganshe* 不干涉) have been used interchangeably in official Chinese documents and by Chinese international relations scholars, but maybe this is changing. New developments here include what looks like a more narrow definition of intervention, in which 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 principles of non-intervention/non-interference.<sup>43</sup> If there is a changing, more narrow, Chinese definition of intervention, then this opens up ways for a lot of legitimate Chinese involvement and activities in other states. In this context it is worth noting how the Director-General of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Department of African Affairs, Lu Shaye 卢沙野, in 2012 acknowledged that China was already “constructively involved” in African politics in practice, for example by sending Chinese special envoys to mediate.<sup>44</sup> Chinese official statements such as this also reflect a more confident Chinese great power diplomacy. Following on from this, it is interesting to note how several Chinese international relations scholars argue that China, given its own historical experiences and strong cultural values and ideas, is uniquely well positioned to play a key role in shaping new norms for what should be regarded as legitimate intervention, and specifically “legitimate great power intervention.”<sup>45</sup>

The main criterion for legitimate intervention stressed by Chinese international relations scholars and by Chinese officials is that there is a UN resolution in place and thus broad international support to back it up. This focus on the UN authorization relates to how Beijing seeks to maintain the UN as the highest international authority – cf. the speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping 习近平 at the general debate of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015.<sup>46</sup> However, there are indications that a UN resolution is becoming less of an ultimate demand, and focus seems to be shifting to the importance

43 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

44 Chen 2016, 357.

45 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015.

46 Xi 2015.

of an invitation or a request from the country in question.<sup>47</sup> 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? That would mean that China would be taking sides in the political crisis in the country against its stated strict adherence to impartiality, neutrality and objectiveness.<sup>48</sup> In relation to these questions, there are some Chinese international relations scholars who then emphasize the need for a request and for support for Chinese intervention from the regional organization involved, for example from the African Union.<sup>49</sup> This, however, opens up the question or challenge of overlapping authorities, for example both the African Union and the Arab League were involved in the lead-up to the intervention in Libya in 2011, where the Arab League in particular played a key role in legitimizing the intervention.<sup>50</sup>

In order to explain why there is this Chinese willingness to move away from insisting on a UN resolution, several Chinese international relations scholars draw on neorealist arguments about how the overall development towards a post-unipolar system, i.e. a declining US superpower position, on the one hand has made it difficult for Beijing to continue keeping a low profile and free-riding, and on the other hand has strengthened Chinese incentives to challenge the established order and apply tough balancing instruments towards the US. The potential costs are lower and Beijing, due to China's stronger economic and military capabilities relative to the US, now also faces new opportunities.<sup>51</sup> There are simply fewer external restrictions and a greater number of incentives – the room for manoeuvre for Chinese foreign and security policy (great power) activism, also in the way that it relates to the question of intervention, has grown.

Another criterion often highlighted by Chinese international relations scholars and reflected in the Chinese foreign and security policy conducted is the involvement of China's own national interests, be they commercial interests, those of protecting Chinese citizens, or political or strategic interests. This criterion is also frequently related to the question of Chinese military capability and ability to intervene, in which it is highlighted that despite rapid increasing military

47 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, School of International Studies, Peking University, 17 April 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. See also Li, Zhiyong 2015.

48 See, e.g., "Position Paper of the People's Republic of China" given by the Chinese Permanent Mission to the UN at the 63rd Session of the UN General Assembly in 2008.

49 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015.

50 See, e.g., Henriksen and Larssen 2016.

51 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, School of International Studies, Peking University, 17 April 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015. See also Yan 2014.

spending for many years, China still needs many more years to build the overseas military infrastructure and capabilities to project power globally.<sup>52</sup>

Summing up, what the Chinese international relations scholars tend to underline when presenting their take on legitimate intervention 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.<sup>53</sup> 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 placed on what Chinese international relations scholars often term “the national interest” (*guojia liyi* 国家利益) of the particular country, which implies that China always seeks to take in the whole picture and the long-term view and not take sides or use military instruments to create or enforce stability. Regarding the question of why there are these developments in the criteria for legitimate intervention, there are neorealist arguments about the changing and growing system-induced pressures on China mentioned above. However, domestic constraints, i.e. the priority of state leaders’ concerns about maintaining domestic support and legitimacy, are highlighted as well.<sup>54</sup> The point is that what gives Chinese leaders support and legitimacy in relation to society is changing, and in recent years more rapidly so, further narrowing Beijing’s room for manoeuvre in relation also to the issue of whether or not to intervene in its foreign and security policy. An illustrative example is the intensive domestic attention and criticism following the deaths of more of the Chinese soldiers involved in UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>55</sup>

### Exploring the Different Degrees and Types of Chinese Intervention

Following on from the debate among Chinese international relations scholars, the question now is how has China’s foreign and security policy practice involving the principle of non-intervention evolved in recent years both in general terms and in relation to specific cases, and how to explain this?

As highlighted above, 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. There has always been a degree of flexibility, but recently the challenges and inconsistencies between Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and Chinese foreign and security policy practice are growing stronger.

52 Roundtable and discussion with Chinese international relations scholars, School of International Studies and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 22 October 2015. See also Li, Jiang 2015; Ren 2013.

53 E.g. Wang, Yizhou 2011.

54 Interviews with Chinese international relations scholars, National Defense University, Beijing, 27 February 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, 20 March 2014, School of International Studies, Peking University, 17 April 2014, School of International Studies, Renmin University, and School of International Studies, Peking University, 19 October 2015.

55 See, e.g., Page 2016.

China has become deeper and more proactively involved in the politics of other regions, for example 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. Chinese leaders have in relation to several international conflicts and crises, for example in relation to Sudan and Afghanistan, presented diplomatic suggestions and offered to play a mediating role.<sup>56</sup> In 2014, China hence hosted the fourth Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan and initiated the Special Consultation in Support of the IGAD-led South Sudan Peace Process.<sup>57</sup> 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, for example in relation to Iran and the Iranian nuclear crisis.<sup>58</sup>

Chinese officials increasingly seek to diversify China's diplomatic outreach beyond contacts with governments to the different groups and factions involved in conflicts, thereby trying to exert Chinese influence differently from the typical Western interventions employing economic sanctions and military instruments, cf. the arguments about a holistic and long-term Chinese approach to conflict resolution.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, peacebuilding and post-conflict engagement have now become part of China's Africa-policy, for example seen in the evolving Forum for the China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) process, where a China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security was established in 2012 with post-conflict reconstruction as one aspect of growing Chinese priority and engagement.<sup>60</sup>

China's commitment to – and engagement in – UN peacekeeping has also been further enhanced. In September 2015 the Chinese President Xi Jinping gave 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, in which China itself will establish an 8,000-troop-strong standby peacekeeping force. Xi Jinping further reported that China will establish a ten-year US\$1 billion China-UN peace and development fund to “support the UN's work and promote the multilateral cooperation cause”.<sup>61</sup> And lastly, indicating the growing Chinese emphasis on the importance and role of regional organizations, Xi Jinping announced that Beijing will provide US\$100 million of free military assistance to the African Union over 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).<sup>62</sup>

56 Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou 2014, 30–34.

57 Chen 2016, 368.

58 See, e.g., Godement 2013.

59 E.g. Li, Zhiyong 2015.

60 Alden and Large 2015, 130–32.

61 Xi 2015.

62 Ibid.

Following on from this, 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 African 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.<sup>63</sup> However, China clearly also has its own narrow strategic and commercial interests in 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 US and other Western powers – does not want to post its military overseas on a long-term basis. This reflects a development in which the degrees and types of Chinese great power activism and intervention become similar to those of other great powers – China is also setting up military facilities and strengthening security partnerships with key states and groups in the different regions.<sup>64</sup>

Along the same lines, there are stronger signs of a kind of Chinese “carrot and stick” diplomacy, in which Beijing has started to show more willingness to use its now stronger economic and military capabilities and strength to influence the domestic politics of other states in order to protect and promote Chinese strategic and commercial interests, for example China's use of economic diplomacy means in its relations with several East Asian states such as the Philippines and Vietnam.<sup>65</sup> In relation to the maritime territorial disputes in East Asia, Chinese leaders have also increasingly been employing coercive military means.

Lastly, there are cases in which Beijing continues to insist on a rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention, for example in relation to Syria. The “lesson from Libya” and a general Chinese suspicion towards the Western, especially the American, motives for intervention are often included in the Chinese argument in support for the importance of upholding the strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention in general, and for the Chinese position on the conflict in Syria in particular.<sup>66</sup> As mentioned above, China's key concern is that the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) framework could be used as a cover and an excuse to turn regime change into a new norm in international politics.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Chinese adherence to the principle of non-intervention is not synonymous with Chinese inaction, and both the debate among Chinese international relations

63 Page and Lubold 2015.

64 See, e.g., Ratner et al. 2015, 19–27.

65 E.g. Glaser 2012.

66 See, e.g., Shen 2012.

67 See Fung 2017.

scholars and the current Chinese foreign and security policy practice provide clues about the evolving Chinese *management* of the principle of non-intervention. The typical Chinese way of “crossing the river by touching the stones” (*mozhe shitou guohe* 摸着石头过河) seems to best characterize 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 comply with the principle of non-intervention, certain criteria for legitimate intervention are set up – i.e. an intervention that does not deviate from 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 that is doing so. Especially since President Xi Jinping took office, Beijing has embraced more flexible and expansive interpretations of non-intervention.<sup>68</sup>

The critical overview of the debate among Chinese international relations scholars shows how the assumptions and conditions underlying the Chinese non-intervention/intervention debate and practice are changing. It is increasingly pointed out how Chinese leaders can no longer free-ride and count on the US to assume the primary responsibility for ensuring the stability of the international system and for delivering the international public goods that China’s further development depends on. That increases the pressures and the incentives for a more active Chinese great power role, for example in mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Furthermore, it is also emphasized how Chinese leaders no longer have to be overly concerned about not challenging the US. This indicates how, since the assessed potential cost in China of using economic and military instruments in a coercive way is lower than previously, such practice could come to play a more prominent role in Chinese foreign and security policy, for example military build-up and the setting up of military bases and military alliances etc. That is to say, Chinese leaders would no longer shy away from using the full diplomatic, economic and military toolbox, and hence the degrees and types of Chinese great power activism and intervention could develop and become like those of other great powers.

The lines between intervention, interference and legitimate foreign and security policy practice have never been clearly defined in Chinese official policy statements and in the Chinese international relations literature. This has maybe been slowly and gradually changing in recent years. The analysis above presents only a first step in identifying and exploring the new concepts, distinctions and approaches developing in China both as innovative responses to new challenges facing China as well as indicative of the confusion and inconsistencies characterizing Chinese foreign and security policy practice on the issue of intervention/

68 Chen 2016, 372.



non-intervention. The many different degrees and types of intervention characterizing Chinese foreign and security policy practice today reflect the complexities of China's current international strategy, with the many drivers pulling in different directions. Therefore, it is not realistic to expect clear-cut definitions and, in many ways, the efforts to present and specify new concepts, distinctions and approaches in the Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox are also directed towards further increasing the room for manoeuvre and flexibility in Chinese foreign and security policy practice.

As mentioned above, there are growing international expectations on Beijing to make more contributions to, and shoulder bigger burdens and responsibilities for, managing and solving international crises and conflicts. However, recently, and especially following Donald Trump's election as US president, there are discussions – also in China – about whether the strong emphasis on humanitarian intervention seen after the end of the Cold War that challenged the traditional primacy of state sovereignty is again declining and whether the popularity of non-intervention is again on the rise. If that is the case, it puts China under less international pressure to change its intervention practices in that direction. Rather, such development gives more room for domestic-induced pressures to strengthen Chinese intervention practices that more narrowly focus on protecting and promoting China's rapidly expanding strategic and commercial interests and activities and on safeguarding Chinese citizens abroad. This arguably also relates to how the Chinese leadership is increasingly held up to scrutiny domestically on its longstanding promise to never compromise on China's core interests and to (re)gain China's great power influence, status and respect. That is to say, if there are in certain cases strong nationalist emotions and expectations mobilized in China, for example due to a perceived threat against legitimate Chinese territory, rights or Chinese citizens and activities in other states, this has been shown to increase pressure on, and incentives for, Chinese leaders to act regardless of whether it is in line or not with the principle of non-intervention. The same would be the case if certain developments in other regions or states were perceived as having a direct negative influence on China's national security, for example this would be a main reason for why Beijing is proactively seeking to mediate between the different groups in Afghanistan. On the other hand, if there is no mobilizing of strong nationalist emotions and expectations domestically, and if China has no strong strategic and commercial interests involved, this has been shown to result in Beijing being more inclined to stay with the more passive and reactive way of the past.

As China gradually has integrated with – and expanded within – the international system, its foreign and security policy has become more 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 Chinese officials to frame China's growing and more proactive role and involvement in other states' domestic affairs as something other than intervention, there is no doubt that the

current development in Chinese foreign and security policy involves making some fundamental choices about strategic priorities and outdated dogma and doctrines; there are limits to how elastic these can be made and creatively reinterpreted while still maintaining credibility.

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**摘要:** 研究国际问题的中国学者目前在激烈地争论着, 中国究竟应该怎样才能真正做到, 在国际事务中既继续奉行不干预政策, 同时又能有效地保护、加强中国的世界地位和利益。随着这种辩论的展开, 新的概念、新的特征以及新的区分方法正在逐渐形成。中国现行的外交和安全政策等体现着一种更加灵活的更加务实的特点, 是对不干预原则的某种新的诠释, 或者说是另一种程度的干预、采取了不同形式的干预。本文围绕着中国的国际问题学者的辩论以及现行的中国的中国外交和安全政策的实行情况, 对“合法的大国干预”这一概念进行了深入的探讨。本文试图通过对本案例的研究为另一个更加宽泛的讨论提供一个新的视角—中国外交和安全政策的改变之推动因素—及其持续性。

**关键词:** 中国; 中国外交和安全政策; 不干预; 合法的大国干预; 正在进行的辩论及实践

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