Introduction

Sun Xuefeng

The year 2012 witnessed emerging debates among pundits and policy analysts in China and abroad on the transformation of Chinese foreign policy. The key to the debate is the continuity and efficiency of the keeping a low profile strategy that Deng Xiaoping initiated at the end of 1980s, which the third and fourth generations of CCP leadership upheld between the 1990s and 2000s.

Many scholars emphasise that China still adheres to Deng’s principle, although it adopted more assertive foreign policies even before the CCP leadership transition in 2012. These scholars, both Chinese and overseas, have also argued that China’s assertive foreign policies are doomed to fail. Other scholars, meanwhile, find that China has experienced improved relations rather than deteriorating ones through transformation of the keeping a low profile strategy to the strategy under the leadership of President Xi Jinping of striving for achievement.

Given the heightened global interest in China’s foreign policy transformation, the CJIP has gone to great lengths to publish insightful academic analyses of the striking transformation, with particular emphasis on debates on its efficiency and global consequences. The CJIP thus seeks to act as a premier forum for facilitating rigorous debates and discussions on all aspects of China’s rise, and its impact on the development of international studies.

Fortunately, our continuous efforts have elicited warm responses from both distinguished scholars and emerging young faculties on all six continents. Over the past two years we have witnessed a sharp increase in submissions on China’s foreign policy transformation. A dozen high quality articles have survived stringent peer reviews and been published in the CJIP. To enhance debates and discussions among international relations scholars, the CJIP editorial team is happy to compile this reader through the selection of 10 cutting edging articles on China foreign policy transformation.

According to these 10 significant articles, three key questions in the debates can be identified: (1) can China benefit more from transformation
of the keeping low profile strategy to that of striving for achievement? (2) how can the dynamics of the transformation be understood? (3) how will the existing international order be shaped by China’s policy transformation?

Prof. Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University leads the debate on the efficiency of China’s policy transformation. Based on China’s foreign relations from 2012 to 2013, he finds that, in comparison with the strategy of keeping a low profile, the strategy of striving for achievement shows more efficiency in shaping a favourable environment for China’s national rejuvenation. He applies the theory of moral realism when explaining the role of the striving for achievement strategy, arguing that morality can increase both international political strength and the political legitimacy of a rising power.

However, Yan’s analyses are challenged by Prof. Qin Yaqing at China University of Foreign Affairs. Taking the Zhongyong dialectic as constituting a core component of background knowledge on the Chinese, he argues that continuity through change is a realistic description of China’s present foreign policy, while continuity is its main theme with regards to strategic goals, designs, and policies as a whole. According to Qin, the inference of a revolutionary turn in China’s foreign policy through a change in the policies related to China’s core interests could potentially culminate in a self-fulfilling prophet of the zero-sum struggle in China’s relations with other countries, especially with the United States.

Prof. Dr. Reinhard Wolf at Goethe University Frankfurt reminds us that China needs to pay more attention to dangerous feedbacks amid ongoing power shifts, maritime security dilemmas, and extravagant public status concerns. If China wants to avoid the policy errors that led to the German self-encirclement before WWI, China should do more to ensure that external trust in its benign intentions grows faster than do its international ambitions and military power. Assessing in depth China’s practice against three distinct strategic logics within peaceful rise (cold, warm and hot peaceful rise), Prof. Barry Buzan of the London School of Economics finds that China’s current practice points firmly towards cold peaceful rise, but that warm peaceful rise is perhaps still possible and offers many strategic advantages.

Engaging in the current debates over China’s foreign policy transformation, Prof. He Kai and Feng Huiyun of Utah University pioneer the theoretical explanations of the continuity and transformation under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Applying operational code analysis to examine the differences and similarities of Xi and Hu’s belief systems, they argue that Xi and Hu’s similar philosophical and instrumental beliefs imply more continuities than changes in China’s foreign policy under Xi, but that Xi’s strategy tends to be more assertive, based on an examination of their cooperative beliefs. This suggests that Xi may adopt an assertive foreign policy to achieve his strategic goals if external pressure grows too great. Yan Xuetong
also emphasises the role of Xi’s strong leadership in the transformation of China foreign policy.

Prof. Barry Buzan and Michael Cox of the London School of Economics adopt the historical approach to understanding the dynamics and efficiency of China’s policy transformation. Comparing the key points of similarity and difference between China today and the United States of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they emphasise that contemporary China is less geostrategically favoured than the United States because China does not have the option the United States had of keeping its relationships with neighbours, other great powers, and the leading power discrete. China thus would pay a huge price if it were to copy the United States model. Prof. Chih-yu Shih of National Taiwan University and Prof. Yin Jiwu of Beijing Foreign Studies University, meanwhile, argue that different sources of Chinese self-role concepts could yield different policy behaviour. They analyse two discourses that have emerged on Chinese foreign policy—core national interest and harmonious world—and go on to introduce the dialectic approach of harmonious realism, wherein indecisiveness is the essential characteristic. They argue that harmonious disciplining, balance, racism, and intervention are the practical forms of China’s harmonious realism, and present a contemporary case analysis that explains the forms, actual policy, and behavioural consequences of China’s self-role conflict.

The global consequences of China’s policy transformation have inspired encouraging academic discussions and debates. Dr. Pichamon Yeophantong of Princeton University finds that China’s global mentality is undergoing an impressive shift from an aversion to taking the lead to one that shoulders the international responsibilities attached to global power status. More importantly, she illustrates how China’s notions of responsible governance are not new, but have deep roots in Chinese traditions of statecraft and corresponding visions of world order. According to Prof. Ian Clark of Queensland University, a rising China faces a major paradox in the process of taking more international responsibility. One the one hand, debates on China’s status could be understood as an expression of the power of norms, wherein China is assessed relative to some universal standard of responsibility. But they might also be viewed as the deployment of norms of power in such a way that impacts its social distribution to China’s disadvantage, by imposing the self-interested standards of the liberal states.

In combination, these 10 articles provide an up-to-date overview of academic debates on China’s evolving foreign policy transformation. In the process of editing these compiling articles we have been particularly impressed by two striking trends in the study of Chinese foreign policy. First, Chinese scholars affiliated to Chinese universities have initiated and shaped the key aspect of current academic debates on China’s foreign policy. Beyond the perspective of China’s new assertiveness, Prof. Yan and Prof.
Qin raise the more thought-provoking research questions of how to evaluate and explain the efficiency of China’s policy transformation. These successful practices demonstrate the increasing capability of Chinese scholars to shape the research agenda in the study of Chinese foreign policy. Second, more scholars, both Chinese and foreign, are adopting Chinese ancient philosophical and political thoughts to develop their innovative theoretical frameworks on the current Chinese foreign policy transformation. These efforts may imply the huge potential of Chinese theoretical thought to make unique contributions to the general development of international relations theory in the process of theorising China’s rise and its engagement with global societies.

In the coming issues, the CJIP will publish more articles engaging in the current debates on China’s foreign policy transformation. The editors assure readers new to the CJIP, as well as long-term followers of the journal, that this series will be of immense interest. We also believe these articles will highlight the way in which the CJIP serves as a platform for scholarship and ideas that present an original perspective on China’s rise and the development of international relations theories. In 2014, the CJIP’s impact factor grew from 0.871 to 1.000 (with a five-year impact factor of 1.197), ranking 23rd in all SSCI international relations journals. We take this opportunity to extend our sincere thanks to authors, reviewers, and readers, and invite all of you to be a part of this exciting journal and its advancing development.