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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Xie Tao**

Episode 22: Assessing China's Foreign Policy  
Under Xi (Part I)

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**Haenle:** You're listening to Carnegie–Tsinghua's "China in the World" podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing. I'm Paul Haenle, director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I'll be your host today.

I'm delighted to be joined by my friend Dr. Xie Tao, a full professor of political science at Beijing Foreign Studies University, where we are conducting the interview today, at the beautiful campus here at Bei Wai as they call it here in Chinese. Doctor Xie Tao has a PhD from Northwestern University, and he is an expert in U.S.-China relations. Xie Tao, we are thrilled you're here with us today to discuss Obama's recent trip to Asia, tensions over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and China's foreign policy under the new leadership. Thank you for joining us.

**Xie:** Paul, my pleasure.

**Haenle:** Let's begin if we can by examining China's foreign policy under the new leadership here in China, more broadly. At this year's meeting of the National People's Congress in March, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi characterized China's diplomacy in the first year of his leadership in office by highlighting the country's more active role as a major, responsible country. Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that in 2014 China would take an active part in international and regional affairs, and play a bigger role in solving global and regional issues by offering China's own solutions. I'd like to know from you on which global and regional issues do you expect to see China playing a more active role in the coming year, and what kind of solutions do you think Chinese leaders will be interested in putting forward in this regard?

**Xie:** Well this is an excellent question. Actually I did not catch this very important statement from our Minister Wang Yi [regarding the] 'active part in international and regional affairs' and 'bigger role' in solving global and regional issues and 'China's own solutions.' Let me start first with China's own solutions. We say "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and so when it comes to international relations we can say "solutions with Chinese characteristics." Now I'm thinking, what kind of solutions would be called Chinese solutions? I would say anything that fits into China's traditional foreign policy principle, for example bilateral instead of multilateral, I would just say that would be China's own solution. Second, [regarding the] no-strings-attached foreign aid policy—I think that would be characterized as a Chinese solution. Another thing that comes to my mind is on the issues like Syria and others, China would not use its own veto but China would adamantly, at least rhetorically, insist on diplomatic negotiations and non-violent solutions to any of these crises. So that's what comes to my mind [in regards to] Chinese solutions.

Then back to the question on 'global and regional issues, China may play a more active role.' Well, it's very hard. You think about global and regional issues. Take the South China Sea as an example. That's a regional issue, right? But China is definitely playing a more active role. But in many people's eyes, this is kind of negatively active [role]. It's not positively active [role]. Global issues—denuclearization, climate change, the Middle East—as far as I can tell, it's very likely that China in this year in particular will play a more active role in climate change, because of China's own pollution problems. So I think China may be more willing to work with the United States on climate change.

**Haenle:** On your earlier point about how you may see more active diplomacy from China, certainly we saw in the case of Syria, Ukraine, China calling for a political solution, which I think all countries will agree to. Will we see China's leaders actually playing a more active diplomatic role—that is to say on the ground, expending political capital, working with other leaders to actually try to find solutions. Is that the kind of more 'active' diplomacy that Foreign Minister Wang Yi is talking about?

**Xie:** I would say that it's possible, but it's unlikely. Why? Because if you see Chinese leaders on the ground in Crimea, or let's say in Vienna, in meetings with President Barack Obama or in the European Union leaders—talking about the destiny or political future of another sovereign country, I think that goes fundamentally against China's noninterference policy, even though we know that China is actually very subtly revising and re-adjusting that kind of policy. But I think, again, China wants to do something. But this is going to be very subtle.

**Haenle:** On that point, you mentioned China's longstanding principle of nonintervention; 'do not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.' You mention that that is slightly changing. Can you give us a sense of how, and what can we expect in the future?

**Xie:** One example is on the Crimea issue. Even though China says that we would respect Ukraine's sovereignty, we also understand that there are complex historical and political factors behind the Crimea crisis. The coded language is that what happens in the Eastern side of Crimea, China is actually going to give this implicit consent to the referendum there. That is viewed by some people as a signal from the Chinese government's side that China is actually willing to go along with some of the outcomes of international crises. I want to say one thing about active diplomacy. Two examples actually. The best example is Premier Li Keqiang now is in Africa. Our President Xi Jinping was in European Union and four European countries in late March. So I think if you are really looking for active, I would interpret this as more confident, more leadership-centered diplomacy. The focus, you can tell, is the traditional European Union and Africa, and you do not see the United States of America or Latin America.

**Haenle:** Xie Tao, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also summed up the diplomatic strategy of the new leadership by focusing on three main developments: one, a new model of great power of great power relations, a new neighborhood diplomacy featuring amity and mutual benefit, and a more balanced approach to relations with developing nations. As for the new type of great power relations between the United States and China, which of course was raised by Xi Jinping when he traveled to the United States as vice-president, and again at the summit with President Obama when he was president at Sunnylands. In this context, what progress do you think has been made on defining this new concept of a new type of great power relationship? How do you assess this effort one year after it was proposed at Sunnylands—how has it developed in your view?

**Xie:** Well in terms of defining the concept, I think there's more struggle on the Chinese side than on the American side about what exactly is meant by this new model of a great power relationship, because the Chinese first proposed this idea, so it's incumbent upon Chinese leaders and scholars to tell Americans—what do you mean by this? I think so far our focus has been two things: no confrontation, and cooperation. No confrontation, like the former Soviet Union type, and also mutual benefit corporation. That's our definition. But is this new? I think it's not new. But what is

new, I think, if you compare the China-U.S. relationship today with U.S.-former-Soviet Union relationship, what is really different is the mind-boggling economic ties, educational/cultural exchanges between the two countries, and these ties were almost completely missing back in the 1960s and 1970s. I think that's the defining characteristic of this relationship. Now about the effort—what has been done? I think the Chinese leadership and Chinese scholars really want to get American policymakers and officials to accept this idea. But my own sense is that there is much, much cooler reception to this idea on the American side than on the Chinese side.

**Haenle:** And you of course just came back from a trip to the United States so you probably heard some of these views expressed while you were in America.

**Xie:** I think in the State Department or in the Pentagon where we met some government officials, I think their overall tone is positive about a new type of great power relationship. But if you examine carefully what they said, it's more or less the same thing: economic cooperation, 'we will try to expand our cooperation, we will try to cooperate where we can but we also should openly discuss our disagreements'—like the conversation between Secretary Hegel and his Chinese counterparts—and 'we can openly disagree.' I think that's more or less the same. I can tell in the overall, the tone is positive. I think American are receptive to this idea, but I don't believe that they are willing to fully embrace this concept. So that's why Susan Rice said in a speech, "We need to operationalize." In social sciences, when we say operationalize, it means you have to give me concrete indicators, right? If you say this relationship is healthy, tell me what do you mean by healthy?

**Haenle:** I think it's very astute of you to pick up on the word that she used. I think it's very important to understanding the U.S. view on this. I agree with you that the United States is looking for some results in terms of greater cooperation, and if the two sides can, as Susan Rice says, operationalize this new type of relationship—that is to say find ways to begin working together on issues where the United States and China have a common stake, where we can make progress for the betterment of both of our countries—this I think U.S. policy-makers would be interested in. But having a new bumper sticker, a new definition just for the sake of a new definition for the relationship, I think the U.S. side as you said is very 'cool' to that idea.

**Xie:** Right. Think about the slogans from the former President Bill Clinton's term. He said "in a comprehensive strategic partnership." You can use these different labels you like, but in the end, when people look at your political legacy and policy, it's 'tell me exactly what you did or what you proposed to do.'

**Haenle:** Now how do you respond; I know in the United States there is a very strong view, a very strong concern that this concept of "new type of great power relationship" ultimately, at the end of the day, means two things. One, China wants greater respect. And two, China wants the United States to concede to its core interests. Many Americans say, 'if that's the starting point for the new type of great power relationship, well it won't work.' Is that the view in China, that this is something as a starting point, that the United States would have to concede on China's core interests in order to be able to move forward?

**Xie:** Well I would definitely go along with the first view, that China would expect more respect from the United States, because when you call this relationship “great power relationship,” that means China is a member of the great power club and it deserves respect. The second thing, that China would expect the United States to concede to China on core interests, I think that may be a bit a little bit stretched. I think the leadership may not have this kind of expectation, because first China needs to tell Americans up front: what are my invaluable core interests? I think everyone knows it’s Taiwan. But is the South China Sea also a core interest? Is Diaoyu Island also a core interest? Tibet? Xinjiang? This is the first thing. Second, even if you are on the same par as the United States of America, that does not necessarily mean that your two countries do not have disputes. Once you have disputes it’s not inevitable that one side will concede to the other side. So that’s my take on this. But the first one I think definitely. We do expect more respect from Americans.

**Haenle:** Thank you very much for joining me for this podcast, and we look forward to having you at the Center on Friday, when we host a group of Harvard Kennedy School graduate students, and we appreciate your involvement in the Center. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua podcast. If you’d like to read or learn more about U.S.-China relations and the security challenges in the Asia-Pacific, you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website at [www.carnegietsinghua.org/](http://www.carnegietsinghua.org/). I encourage you to visit and see the work of all of our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening and be sure to tune in next time.