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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Xie Tao**

Episode 23: Assessing China's Foreign Policy  
Under Xi (Part II)

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**Haenle:** You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua "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 in Beijing. I'm Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I'll be your host today.

I'm delighted to be joined by my friend Doctor Xie Tao, a full professor of political science at Beijing Foreign Studies University, where we are conducting the interview today, and the beautiful campus are here at Bei Wai and they call it here in Chinese. Dr. Xie Tao has a PhD from Northwestern University and he's 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:** President Obama took a trip to Asia recently, as you know. U.S. officials stressed prior to the trip that the visit and the broader US "rebalancing" policy to Asia are not aimed at containing China or trying to keep China down. Rather, the rebalancing policy is an effort to expand U.S. economic, diplomatic, trade, defense, and security engagement with the most dynamic region in the world, a policy which welcomes China's peaceful rise and positive-sum cooperation. Yet in China, most seem unconvinced. How, in your view, has President Obama's recent trip to Asia been received here in China?

**Xie Tao:** Well you got it right. I think you ask most Chinese officials and policy-makers and analysts they would say no. We're not convinced about your benign intent in this area. One example is that if you look at President Obama's statements on Diaoyu Islands, I know that this has been a long-standing U.S. policy: the United States does not take position on sovereignty. The United States only insists on peaceful solutions to any of the disputes. The Chinese government would view that statement as an implicit endorsement or emboldening of the Japanese. Another sign: when President Barack Obama was in the Philippines, and the United States and the Philippines agreed to upgrade their defense treaty a little bit, and Chinese scholars view that as another unfriendly sign. So I think regardless of what are the reassurances from the State Department or Barack Obama, the damage is done. I'd use that word: done. The damage was done.

**Haenle:** Now you talk about U.S. approach to the region. The Chinese leadership seems to be taking a new approach to China's neighborhood: diplomacy. Chinese leaders embarked last fall on a diplomatic and economic charm offensive that included trips by the leadership to Central Asia, also to Southeast Asia, in an effort to create a more welcoming peripheral environment. But many outside of China also see China as having taken steps that have caused anxiety and uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region, and heightened the risks surrounding regional security flashpoints, for example the sudden surprise announcement of the Chinese Air Defense Identification Zone—the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone—or the blocking of the Philippines' ships to the Second Thomas Scholl. Some also see differences in how China has treated certain countries in its neighborhood. Can you give our listeners a sense of your view of China's new diplomacy to the periphery, and how the recent behavior, both the charm offensive but also the mixed steps surrounding territorial disputes, can be understood?

**Xie:** Well this is an excellent question—I think this is a puzzle to me. I think to many observers, it's like one step forward and two steps back. You mentioned last year President Xi Jinping proposed the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, and when he was in Central Asia he proposed to build up the Silk Road Economic Belt to integrate Central Asia. So this “North” strategy and “South” strategy was obviously aimed to pacify China's neighbors, to bring them more on board with China's foreign policy.

**Haenle:** To convince them that China's rise was good for them.

**Xie:** Yeah, that it is good for them. That it's a win-win situation. Then you mentioned the rise in tensions in the South China Sea. So there's really a puzzle. And besides, remember early this year the leadership convened a high-profile conference on China's peripheral diplomacy. And so one the one hand you have all these signs that the leadership is wanting to really make their relationship better. On the other hand, you do see troubling signs in the South China Sea, [and] in Japan. So how do you explain this?

My theory on this is that we do mean to cultivate better relationships with those countries, but on the other hand we do need to have these foreign policy crises to discipline the Chinese military. President Xi Jinping, I would say, is perhaps creating these crises to tell his top brass, ‘are you ready to fight a war?’ And if the brass says ‘no we are not,’ then ‘why are you not?’ ‘Because many of us have been corrupted—we are not really getting to any serious training.’ Then President Xi Jinping will say ‘okay, if you guys are not ready, we are going to clean the army, clean the navy, the air force.’ So I think my theory [is] that by doing this, we gave people the impression that we are really nationalistic; we want to fight a war. But deep down—in the bottom, in the heart—they are actually using this to clean up the military. One example is this high-profile investigation of the two-star general. So I don't know if that makes sense to you, but I think that these kinds of crises must have a domestic logic there.

**Haenle:** Let's talk for a second about the ongoing confrontation right now in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands, since China's state-owned CNOOC (China National Offshore Oil Company) moved its deep-sea drilling oil rig to a disputed area, to the northwest of the islands. The oil rig's timing seemed perplexing given it follows immediately after President Obama's trip to the region and it happened just before the ASEAN summit in Myanmar, and in the midst of China's efforts to create a more friendly environment, which we've discussed. Can you give us a sense of the rationale and the broader context behind the decision to move the oil rig to this disputed territory? And was it coordinated by the government? What was the intention of that? And how do you explain the timing?

**Xie:** Well [there are] two possible scenarios. One, this was premeditated, like you said, organized by the Chinese government because there were so many ships involved. The second scenario is that this was just a single-minded pursuit by CNOOC, an oil company. But I'm inclined to believe that the government must have been involved somewhere in this. Otherwise, how could you get forty ships, and they seemed to be very well-prepared for a confrontation with the Vietnamese—they were equipped with water cannons, you know. How many fishing ships are equipped with water cannons, right? So I think there must be reason. And then you said this was just on the heels of Barack Obama's visit to Southeast Asia. But you see that Vietnam was not on President Barack

Obama's list. So, I think there's some speculation is [sic] that China wants to test the bottom-line for U.S. commitment to Vietnam. So I think the logic is like this: if Vietnam is not on the list of President Barack Obama's visit, does that mean that the United States is not sufficiently committed to Vietnam? Well when I was in Washington, D.C., when I talked to U.S. officials, they would say in a very unequivocal way, it would be a terrible mistake to assume that any country that is not on the list of President Barack Obama's visit would not be within the purview of U.S. defense concerns.

**Haenle:** Now in the past, China has elected to shelve territorial disputes and pursue joint development in order to focus on its own economic development. It seems that recently, China has discarded this approach and is less interested in "biding its time" or "hiding its capabilities." Has China's approach here changed? And if so, why? And what can be done to de-escalate the situation in the South China Sea and repair relations with Vietnam, a country that China has historically had good relations with?

**Xie:** Well first, about whether China has changed its approach, I would say China has not. Why? Because Deng Xiaoping said, you know, 'put away the disputes, let's focus on joint development.' But there's another phrase, which is almost always neglected by journalists, which is that China has sovereignty over those islands. So Deng Xiaoping says as long as you recognize China has sovereignty over those islands, then we can go along with shelving the disputes and joint development. But that's a paradox there. How can you pursue this, right? And then why do I say China has not changed? Because in the 1970s and 1980s, number one, there wasn't much development in those sea waters. Second, in the 1970s and 1980s and even up to the 1990s, neither the Japanese nor the Philippines actively challenged China's position. So I would say on the one hand there was more assertiveness on the Japanese and Filipino side. On the other hand, there was also a perceptible Chinese assertiveness, and presumably because of China's growing power and growing public awareness and also growing public pressure on the Chinese leadership.

Secondly, how do we de-escalate this tension? I think it's going to be very hard. Now if my theory about domestic politics cleaning up the military is correct, I would say probably within a year or so after the trial and sentence of that two-star general, plus probably more coming, then within two or three years, when President Xi Jinping is firmly in control of the military, plus he has achieved his goal of really modernizing the Chinese military into a professional one, then maybe at that point you will see a de-escalation. But then, by that point the Chinese military would be really in a position to fight a war.

**Haenle:** Well I've taken a lot of your time today, and I want to thank you for your insights. It's been fascinating. Thank you very much for joining me for this podcast. 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.