

FOREIGN POLICY AT THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS: MORE OF THE SAME

by
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The Next China is still China, said Wang Yi, in response to a question at the press conference held on the side-lines of the National People's Congress (NPC). The phrase reveals the self-assured posture that the Party wishes to project, which is already being [adopted](#) by China's diplomats overseas. Drawing from confidence in China's capabilities and much like the continuity inherent in Wang Yi's statement, China's diplomatic and foreign policy outlined on the side-lines of the Two Sessions sprung no surprises and offered very little by way of change.

Many of China's top leaders and the foreign minister spoke at length on significant foreign policy issues during the Two Sessions. Their statements revealed great confidence and belief in China's current handling of major international issues and bilateral relations. Beijing is convinced that its posture and position have struck a fine balance of assertiveness along with constructive and confident posturing.

Xi Thought Guiding Chinese Foreign Policy

Even a cursory reading of documents and speeches at the NPC reveals the centrality of Xi Jinping's Thought on Diplomacy in China's foreign policy. The Premier and foreign minister have credited foreign policy achievements in 2023 to Xi's diplomatic strategy, outlined at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs. At the [press conference](#), Wang Yi explicitly stated that the "top-level design" for foreign policy was implemented by the foreign service and the Ministry would continue to execute the top leadership's vision. More importantly, the core tenet of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy continues to remain the basic goal of China's foreign policy – to [actualize](#) a vision of a "community with a shared future for mankind". Its adoption in declarations and resolutions at the UN, SCO, BRICS and other international fora has been cited by Wang Yi as a measure of successful diplomatic work, suggesting

that increasingly, assessment of the Ministry's work is based on wholesale adoption and promotion of Xi's vision. Moreover, it implies that China will continue to feature Xi Jinping Thought at the heart of its multilateral practices, assigning the tenet more political capital.

Rather surprisingly but nonetheless highlighting Xi's importance, Wang Yi mentioned Xi a total of 21 times during the press conference, compared to 2023 when Qin Gang [mentioned](#) Xi only 9 times. Moreover, unlike Qin Gang, Wang Yi explicitly attributed specific policy directives issued by Xi Jinping for addressing the most pressing foreign policy issues – China's 3 [principles](#) on U.S.-China relations, China's [four-point](#) plan for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, [eight steps](#) for further development of the Belt and Road Initiative, approach to neighborhood diplomacy, [principles](#) for China-Africa cooperation and Global AI Governance initiative. The foreign minister located Xi at the center of China's handling of the most significant external challenges, a ubiquitous feature of policy making in China.

Focus on Major Power Connotation

The Two Sessions offered a clear picture of how Beijing characterizes its bilateral relationships with major powers. Driven by the assessment that geopolitical issues have become more acute and aware of the growing list of countries that have adversarial relations with China, foreign policy is likely to focus on [stability](#) in relations with major powers like Russia, U.S. and Europe. China's relationship with Russia in particular, was characterized by the foreign minister as a strategic choice, necessary for maintaining stability through multi-polarity. The characterization perhaps indicates that Beijing is more confident of its diplomatic support for and economic relationship with Russia now that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has reduced to a slow burn and the emergence of other conflicts has shifted public attention away from China's lifeline to Moscow. China's self-assured bearing also stems from [stabilization](#) of its diplomatic relations with the U.S.

Wang Yi's remarks on U.S.-China ties were measured, revealing the importance Beijing attaches to stability

in relations with the U.S. He acknowledged the progress in improving relations since Xi's visit with U.S. President Joe Biden in San Francisco but also pointed out, not too ferociously, that the U.S. continues to devise new ways of restricting China. Wang Yi attempted to balance China's demand for mutual respect with its need for stable U.S.-China ties. Encouraged by improving prospects of the latter, Beijing's assurance of its foreign policy has been enhanced. Perhaps to avoid confrontation with the U.S. just as ties are stabilizing, mentions of the U.S. and questions about U.S.-China ties were limited this year, compared to last year. The U.S. was mentioned only 19 times this time in response to one question, compared to around 34 times in response to 7 questions in 2023. Restricting the number of questions was intentional, given that China's government pre-approves questions posed to the foreign minister.

Europe presented Beijing the best opportunity to resume its Wolf Warrior diplomacy when EU lawmakers on March 6 [initiated](#) proceedings to impose retroactive tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. Normally, Beijing would take the opportunity to lambaste the EU for protectionist measures and hit back with stern warnings about China's capacity to retaliate. However, Wang Yi appeared to take a toned-down approach. He maintained that the EU and China "[do not have clashing fundamental interests](#)" and that both sides should be "characterized rightly as partners". Beijing's surprisingly tame rhetoric on Europe will have to be evaluated against its eventual countermeasures to the tariffs placed by the EU. Nonetheless, should China's tame rhetoric actually translate into a moderate approach when responding to the latest EU tariffs, it might indicate the onset of a new approach to Brussels by Beijing.

China's [soft language](#) is perhaps an effort to stabilize its relations with U.S. allies. It also explains Wang Yi's visit to Australia and New Zealand, the first time a Chinese foreign minister has visited Australia since 2017, amidst reports that China and Australia may end a three-year tariff war. Hence, as Beijing oscillates between strong and soft rhetoric on U.S. allies, tempering its language based on the immediate

conditions, its engagement with the global south and countries in its immediate neighborhood is [expected](#) to remain consistent. Wang Yi emphasized China's continued commitment to forging stronger relations with countries in the developing world. Claiming that China has found the distinctive "Asian way for getting along with each other", the foreign minister was optimistic about China's diplomacy in the developing world. The "Asian way" has China at the center, projecting itself as mediator and a responsible actor on the world stage, a strong contradiction to China's unyielding and aggressive posture on territorial disputes involving itself, like the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Mediator and Brawler: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The Foreign Minister emphasized China's contribution to [facilitating](#) Saudi-Iran talks, success in brokering a [ceasefire](#) agreement in Myanmar and its purportedly objective position on the Ukraine conflict. Wang Yi's goal was to highlight that China has emerged as "[mediator](#)" of international conflicts over the last few years, which is a point of pride for the Party. However, it is important to note that China's involvement as mediator is restricted to the developing world, where its economic coercion has compelled countries to participate in negotiations. This has been done mainly to undermine the U.S. as a responsible global power and elevate itself as capable of shouldering the burdens of a global power.

Furthermore, Chinese attempts at peace-making do little to hide the contradictions in China's diplomacy. China's actions related to disputes involving itself, like the South China Sea or Taiwan, has signaled its capacity to play both roles, a mediator and brawler. Take the South China Sea, where China has [engaged](#) in aggressive patrolling and clashed with claimants in the region. According to the foreign minister, China has demonstrated a "high degree of restraint" on maritime disputes. The fact that China emphasizes the rhetoric of restraint, in the face of contradictory actions, suggests a growing certainty in the power of its foreign policy to wash over China's aggressive approach to resolving territorial disputes. For China, flexibility and restraint are difficult when it comes to core interests and easier to demand as a mediator

with no skin in the game. On Taiwan, Wang Yi reiterated China's unyielding stance on reunification. He expressed China's desire to attain peaceful reunification with the island, while emphasizing strategic patience. Although Li Qiang's [work report](#) omitted the word peaceful in the phrase 'peaceful reunification' in one particular reference to Taiwan, China's policy on the island did not change during the Two Sessions. Nor did it feature as prominently as it did at last year's press conference. Taiwan was mentioned by the foreign minister 14 times this year, compared to 23 times in 2024. It wasn't just Wang Yi who made remarks on Taiwan at the People's Congress this year. Politburo Standing Committee member and chair of China's Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs, Wang Huning, also [stated](#) China's firm opposition to "Taiwan independence" during deliberations with NPC deputies. The People's Congress also featured discussions on Hong Kong, which unlike Taiwan, was a core interest for China and there were significant developments in policy.

Hong Kong, BRI, and China's International Image

Although Wang Yi's press conference did not feature any mentions of Hong Kong, its significance was made evident by the [passage](#) of Article 23 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong. The domestic national security bill was [discussed](#) at the Two Sessions by Politburo Standing Committee member and leader of the Central Coordination Group for Hong Kong and Macau Affairs, Ding Xuexiang, with delegates from Hong Kong and Macau. Ding noted that the practice of "One Country Two Systems" had made "significant achievements", and Hong Kong had moved "from chaos to governance to prosperity". The introduction of the "Safeguarding National Security Bill" has tightened Beijing's grip on Hong Kong, a sign that it is prepared to act decisively on core national interests even if it may damage China's international image.

Wang Yi [stated](#) that "China prospers through interaction with the world and the world becomes better off when China does well". In a similar vein, he asserted that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would continue as an engine for common development and modernization, offering multidimensional global

infrastructure connectivity. China's execution of the BRI is likely to continue as it did for the last decade, albeit with a slightly modified focus. While continuing to provide public infrastructure, the BRI will be leveraged to keep China's access to foreign markets open and free of interference. The pursuit for technology, talent, and resources is driven by domestic economic factors as well as technological competition with the U.S.

As the BRI promotes China's image abroad, a similarly significant component of its image as a credible development partner stems from China's position as manufacturing hub of the world. The foreign minister dismissed pessimistic views of the country's diminishing growth, warning that "missed judgements would result in missed opportunities".

What Next?

The Two Sessions confirmed Xi's centrality in foreign policy decision-making, reiterated China's unflinching position on core issues like Taiwan and promised to sustain momentum in endeavors like the BRI and outreach to the Global South. But Beijing's rhetoric at the Two Sessions also suggests a softer line on U.S. allies like Europe and Australia and even with the U.S., although this does not imply China will concede ground on major issues.

In the short term, Beijing's diplomatic behavior is likely to oscillate between pragmatism and hard-line, based on its perception of stability in bilateral relations with important states. Above all, it is certain to project and protect China's image as a source of prosperity and development partner of the Global South.

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