

Chinese interviewee, “We do not think this view of others seeing us as assertive as accurate. This view comes especially from the West. For us, to use assertiveness is to be more active (*jiji* 积极). It has positive connotations, more like confidence, rather than negative connotations. These activities that you see from our diplomats reflect that confidence. It comes with China’s rise. It is natural you see this on the world stage” (p. 92). As such, there is a perceptual difference between how China defines assertiveness and how others view China’s behavior. Loh’s book makes an important point that explains how the assertiveness “meme” comes about more recently despite China having used assertive measures in the distant past (see Ketian Zhang, *China’s Gambits: The Calculus of Coercion*, 2024). That is, perceptions of China’s identity by other officials, diplomats, and representatives are commonly derived from the Chinese foreign ministry and its diplomats (p. 98). The assertiveness of the foreign ministry’s agents and institutions comes to characterize China from the perspectives of other non-Chinese diplomats (p. 98). It is in this sense that Loh accurately demonstrates the growing importance of the Chinese foreign ministry.

The perceptual difference between how China and other countries view assertiveness leads to a question about Loh’s book: how do we define assertiveness? Is there an objective definition of what is assertive? Loh defines assertiveness as “the tendency to leverage one’s resources to impose costs on others to extract compliance and/or police behavior” (p. 16). “Diplomatic assertiveness refers to using various diplomatic levers to extract concessions, police behavior, and impose costs” (p. 16). This definition begs the question: how does one distinguish assertiveness from coercion or coercive diplomacy? Is coercive diplomacy the same as diplomatic assertiveness? Or is there a difference between assertiveness and coercion and if so, what is it? The dictionary definition of assertiveness is “confident and forceful behavior” and, if we follow the dictionary definition, would it be fruitful to include both negative and positive aspects of assertiveness? That is, wolf warrior diplomacy is an example of negative (and possibly coercive) assertiveness, whereas China’s participation at the UN, albeit assertive, is not necessarily negative (for China’s increasingly active participation at the UN, see Courtney J. Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status*, 2019). In this sense, Loh could potentially make greater use of the dataset in the appendix to tease out positive and negative kinds of China’s assertiveness.

Relatedly, Loh argues in the book that China’s assertiveness is progressively guided by and represented through its foreign ministry and its diplomats rather than military actors, though the latter have traditionally been considered the key component of Chinese assertiveness. This observation is very much in line with my work on China’s coercion that China has been increasingly utilizing

non-militarized coercive tools in lieu of military coercion (Zhang, *China’s Gambits*). This shift, however, does not necessarily mean that the military is no longer central. Rather, it may suggest that there is more inter-agency coordination, as Loh’s book points out.

In short, *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry* is a wonderfully rich account of the practice of China’s foreign policy. It moves beyond a state-centric model to examine the individuals implanting Chinese foreign policy and convincingly pushes back against the notion that the foreign ministry is not a critical actor in Chinese foreign policy. Its fascinating interview and ethnographic data aptly demonstrate that Chinese assertiveness has increasingly come to be represented by Chinese diplomats and the foreign ministry. One final question arises precisely from one of the interviews. One former Chinese diplomat noted in the interview that they felt very restricted, stifled, and watched (p. 85). While this is not the question Loh’s book sets out to answer, one cannot but wonder: how does one evaluate the effects of the current practice of China’s diplomacy? What are the foreign policy and domestic politics impacts of a Chinese diplomat corps that is heavily restricted and has a constant need to show allegiance to the Chinese political system?

Response to Ketian Zhang’s Review of *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy*

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— Dylan M.H. Loh 

I thank Ketian Zhang for her comprehensive summary and thoughtful review of *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry*. She raised a few intriguing questions in her review, and I would like to engage with those points in my response.

Zhang rightly pointed out that assertive diplomacy is not “internalized by every Chinese diplomat” while noting that there are substantial variations in how this assertiveness is practiced despite the political centrality of the Chinese political system. Too often, the literature on contemporary Chinese politics tends towards the “Chinese system” as monolithically directed by the Party General-Secretary. While this is not untrue, it is partial. This interpretation erases the manifold agencies and capacities that sub-national actors can bring to bear—even under Xi. To be sure, that is not to say that other actors, including the Chinese foreign ministry, is an autonomous alternative nor can it resist the wishes of its leaders. As Zhang shows in her own book, Chinese coercion decisions are still, broadly, made by the Party center.

Zhang further reminds me that the appendix where I detailed instances of cooperative and assertive behavior from 2009–2020 could figure more prominently and systematically in the book. I concur with her that there

is certainly space to expand upon the empirics here and weave these into the book. Nevertheless, it was a methodological judgment call on my part to focus more on the interview data and have the appendix serve as a complementary and supplementary resource—providing additional context and evidence to support the arguments and as a foil for my interview questions.

Next, she asks about the definition of assertiveness present in the book. In *China's Rising Foreign Ministry*, I operationalized assertiveness as “the tendency to leverage one's resources to impose costs on others to extract compliance and/or police behavior”. I agree that this may not necessarily capture “positive” aspects of Chinese diplomacy. While my book's aim was to examine the negative aspects of assertiveness; per Zhang, there is scope for more engagement regarding “positive” diplomacy which I hope to take on in future work.

Finally, Zhang asked about the dynamics of different actors evaluating Chinese diplomatic practices differently. She points out that there are international and domestic impacts when Chinese diplomacy is driven by the need to show political allegiance. Indeed, Chinese “wolf warrior” diplomacy is well received at home but encroaches on western diplomatic sensibilities abroad, leading to mismatches of perceptions for both “competence” and “assertiveness”. How PRC diplomats selectively respond to claims of assertiveness—explaining, defending, and even embracing it—is intriguing but one that I did not consider here.

China's diplomacy is a fast-moving and evolving phenomenon, there is certainly more work to be done to better understand the various aspects of China's foreign ministry and its diplomats. Like Zhang's fascinating work in *China's Gambit*, this book hopes to advance the literature on Chinese foreign policy, with a fresh take on its diplomats and diplomacy.

China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion. By Ketian Zhang.
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Ketian Zhang's *China's Gambit* is a timely, theoretically rich, and accessible book that investigates the “why” and “when” of China's coercion decisions to perceived threats. The book persuasively argues that China's decisions to use coercion are based on a careful calculation of costs and benefits, where the need to “demonstrate resolve” is weighed against potential economic and geopolitical consequences (pp. 9–10). Contrary to popular belief, China tends to favor non-military coercion, rather than military responses. Indeed, Chinese leaders employ a range of coercive tools including military, economic, political,

and grey-zone measures. As the author argues, the growing use of nonmilitary tactics like economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure suggests these strategies may be equally, if not more, effective in achieving desired outcomes (p. 3). Importantly, Zhang also provides empirical evidence of specific cases when China does not coerce—thus accounting for both the *absence* and *presence* of coercive behavior.

There are important theoretical interventions in the book. Zhang introduces cost-balancing theory where the centrality of reputation for resolve is weighed against economic costs and issue importance which in turn, determines coercion decisions (p. 30). As a foil, she highlights alternative approaches—leadership dynamics, bureaucratic politics, structural realism, and nationalism—that could also affect coercion calculations. She argues, however, that the economic costs and the geopolitical backlash that may arise from coercion decisions are significant beyond the aforementioned factors. She correctly points out that military coercion is a costly signal (p. 42) and that is why an analytical turn to a “full spectrum of coercion”, including non-military means is crucial to understanding how China coerces and why it coerces (p. 14). At the same time, she contends that establishing a reputation for resolve is critical for states to assert their national security interests to be perceived as credible. In that way, coercion is employed not only to influence the target but also to signal potential adversaries (pp. 19–20).

She examines four case studies in methodical fashion—1) South China Sea, 2) East China Sea, 3) Taiwan, and 4) Tibet—to exemplify the theoretical framework. In each of those cases, she details, rigorously, the variations in coercion decisions by China. In the South China Sea case, she investigates three subcases and found temporal and cross-national variations in China's coercive choices. For example, there are cross-national differences where China coerced the Philippines the most, followed by Vietnam, but exercised only “mild” coercion against Malaysia. Zhang finds that the quest to establish resolve is the strongest in the Philippines case whereas the Malaysian experience presents itself as having high geopolitical and economic costs while the need to establish resolve is lower.

For the East China Sea example, she observes that the need to establish resolve is “low in the pre-2005 period” but turned “high in the post-2005 period, and peaked around 2015, before decreasing” (p. 102). Thus, in the 2010 “boat clash incident”, China needed to show resolve and used non-militarized coercion as the clash got increasingly publicized while economic costs remained low. In the case of Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012, the need to establish resolve was demonstrably higher as the move by Tokyo was seen as provocative and detrimental to Beijing's interests. As such,