

# Epistemic Community, Intellectuals, and Chinese Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

This article examines the formation of Chinese foreign policy from the perspective of epistemic community and intellectuals. The impact of this community on Chinese foreign policy has drawn broad attention among China watchers in the West. The key developments under Jiang and Hu are the increasingly active and multi-layered channels between the centre and the periphery. In this paper, I have developed a notion of seven channels between these two bodies. The types of policy mechanisms include consultations with policy-makers, internal reports, conferences and public policy debates, policy NGOs, outside-system discussions, overseas scholars, and the epistemic community. I argue that the recent developments in intellectual and think-tank participation in the foreign policy-making process in Beijing have achieved great progress, but at the same time there are also severe limitations. I call this phenomenon “limited interactions between the centre and the periphery”. One may anticipate that as civil society continues to develop in China, there will be further demand for policy input and increasing professionalism in both governmental agencies and think-tanks. It is likely that this will push intellectuals and scholars to play even greater roles in the years to come.

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse the increasing role of intellectuals and think tanks in the formation of Chinese foreign policy over the course of past decades. As we know, in contemporary Chinese politics since the 1949 Revolution, one of the most significant events was the transition to the era of Deng Xiaoping, who took the leading position in 1978 in China as the “second generation” of leadership in Chinese politics after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Major changes in Chinese politics and foreign policy occurred between the eras of Mao and Deng. Deng’s reform and openness policy has fundamentally redirected China’s development both domestically and internationally. The era of Jiang Zemin and the current leadership of Hu Jintao can be seen as a continuation of the Deng era in terms of general direction, but these new leaders do have their own characteristics. It is necessary, therefore, for us to examine the changes and continuities between these different eras.

In 1992, I published “Domestic Factors of Chinese Foreign Policy: From Vertical to Horizontal Authoritarianism” (Zhao 1992), in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, which analysed differences between the era of Mao and that of Deng.<sup>2</sup> Now that more than a decade has passed, it is time for us to examine the most recent development in the post-Deng era and analyse future directions of Chinese foreign policy and how it will be influenced by intellectuals and think-tanks. In the above-mentioned article, I characterised the changing process of foreign policy in China as that from Mao’s era of vertical authoritarianism (i.e., one-person domination) to Deng’s era of horizontal authoritarianism (i.e., collective decision-making). I also pointed out that although they have demonstrated increasing importance, intellectuals have not yet become an independent entity in China’s political life. I further argued that they have gained more freedom to discuss policy issues internally, but externally, or publicly, they must support official lines. Think-tanks have a fairly high degree of freedom to conduct internal discussions on a variety of issues but it is difficult, if not impossible, for research institutes to voice dissenting points of view openly. I further explained that a scholar who is allowed to discuss foreign policy issues in public is expected to explain and validate only the official party lines.

It is only natural as time passes that the scope and degree of participation has increased in the post-Deng era, as leaders have vowed to continue Deng’s reform and openness policies. President Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Zhu Rongji have encouraged intellectuals and think-tanks to participate in the policy-making process in a variety of ways, and the most salient participation occurred in economic policy-making. In the period of 2003-2004, the new leadership of the fourth generation completed the power transition and began to take the reins.<sup>3</sup> President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao assumed the party and government leadership, respectively. In the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Party Congress on September 19, 2004, Jiang Zemin passed his last remaining position, the powerful Chairman of the Central Military Commission, to Hu. The power transition, therefore, can be viewed as complete. In analysing the development from the era of Deng to the post-Deng era under the leadership of Jiang and Hu, one sees increasing interactions between the leadership and intellectuals and think-tanks.

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