

Lying Low No More? China's New Thinking on the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* Strategy

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A series of moves in China's foreign policies since the global financial crisis in 2008 seems to suggest that China is now more confident than ever in its external behaviour. Indeed, some Western observers argue that China's new confidence even borders on arrogance. Domestically, there is an emerging debate over the famous "tao guang yang hui" (TGYH) strategy. Is China beginning to behave in an arrogant way? Will China change the TGYH strategy? This article documents the evolution of the TGYH strategy and explains why there is an emerging interest in it today. It argues that the TGYH strategy will be continued as a national strategy, though some modifications to it will be highly likely in coming years.

2010 witnessed the emergence of a more confident and even more assertive China in international and regional affairs, thus prompting a large number of Western government officials, pundits and scholars to label China as "assertive", "arrogant" and "revolutionary", and to affirm that the Chinese are

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finally “revealing their true colours”.¹ Many believe that China has adopted a new approach to international affairs, an approach that sharply departs from China’s long guiding principle of foreign policies, i.e., *tao guang yang hui* (hereinafter TGYH). This view immediately raises several questions. First, is it correct to claim that China has decided to abandon the famous TGYH strategy? Second, what are the thoughts of the Chinese elites about TGYH? Third, what are the factors that affect Chinese thinking on TGYH? Fourth, what are the possible consequences of a modified TGYH strategy or a completely new strategy?

Given the centrality of TGYH in China’s foreign policy, one might expect a large and systematic literature on TGYH in both Chinese and English writings. It is rather striking, however, that there is very little systematic theorising about TGYH in spite of the frequent explicit or implicit mentions of it in almost all writings of Chinese foreign policy since the 1990s. For instance, few have offered a precise definition of TGYH and an account of how the term has evolved and transformed over time. More problematical, no one has analysed how to empirically measure TGYH so that one can determine empirically whether China has changed or will change its stance on TGYH. Most Chinese discussions on TGYH tend to focus on abstract meanings of it and avoid more rigorous but challenging methodological issues with regard to TGYH.

This article, divided into four parts, documents the recent developments of the TGYH strategy by analysing the various positions in China’s internal debates. The first part offers a short historical review of the term TGYH in Chinese foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping first coined it in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second part discusses the current domestic debates over the TGYH strategy by focussing on views of scholars, government officials and other elites. The third part focuses on the domestic as well as international causes of the new thinking on the TGYH strategy. The final part analyses the possible consequences of such new thinking on China’s overall foreign policies and China’s relations with other major powers.

What is *Tao Guang Yang Hui* (TGYH)?

Although almost everyone agrees on the importance of TGYH in China’s foreign policies, its exact meaning is debateable. It is sometimes viewed as

¹ See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, “China’s Bad Bet against America”, at <<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye80/English>> [10 Mar. 2011]; and Elizabeth C. Economy, “The Game Changer: Coping with China’s Foreign Policy Evolution”, *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2010): 142–52. For a good summary of the Western discussion about a more assertive China, see Michael Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China”, *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (2010): 1–19.

China's unarticulated grand strategy, and at other times, as only a tactic or a guiding principle in China's foreign policies. It is important to first understand how the term TGYH emerged and has evolved since the early 1990s.

The origins of the term lie in Deng Xiaoping's various speeches and talks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The context and timing of Deng's articulation of TGYH is extraordinary as Deng used it to describe China's foreign policy orientations when China was facing serious domestic difficulties and tremendous pressures from the West as a result of the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Deng Xiaoping first mentioned the principle of TGYH in 1989. Facing an uncertain international situation in which major Western powers suspended high-level diplomatic interactions with and imposed economic and political sanctions against Beijing after the turmoil, Deng told other Chinese leaders that China should *lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu* (observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly).² Although Deng did not use the precise TGYH phrase, the spirit of TGYH was clear in his talks. In Deng's words, "When it comes to the international situation, three sentences can summarise it. First, we should observe calmly. Second, we should secure our position. Third, we should cope with affairs calmly. We need to be calm, calm, and calm; we should focus on our own job and do it well".³

The only time when Deng actually used the phrase TGYH was in 1992 when he was discussing China's development problems. In his words, "We will only become a big political power if we keep a low profile (TGYH) and work hard for some years; and we will then have more weight in international affairs".⁴ So it is clear from the talk that Deng's main focus was still on domestic development when the term TGYH was used.

The interesting question is: when did TGYH become a guiding principle of China's foreign policy? Unfortunately, direct empirical evidence is hard to locate, thus we cannot determine with confidence when TGYH became a *de facto* official strategy. It is possible that Deng's core message of TGYH was gradually accepted by other Chinese leaders. One of the first mentions of TGYH by other Chinese leaders appeared in then President Jiang Zemin's speech in 1991.⁵ Later in 1995, Jiang Zemin put some emphasis on *yousuo zuowei* (get some

² Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, III* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993), p. 321.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Deng first mentioned TGYH in 1992. See Leng Rong and Wang Zuoling, eds., *Deng Xiaoping Nianpu (1975-1997)* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2004), p. 1346.

⁵ See Zhu Weilie, "Tao Guang Yang Hui: A Shared Idea of World Civilisations", *Wenhui Daily*, 14 Aug. 2010, at <<http://pdf.news365.com.cn/whpdf/20100814/WH10081406.pdf>> [9 Jan. 2011].

things done), meaning that China would continue the TYGH strategy and get something accomplished in international affairs.⁶

In a speech in 1998, Jiang Zemin described China's foreign policy principle in the following words: "*Lengjing guancha, chenzhuo yingfu, juebu dangtou, taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei*" (observe calmly, cope with affairs calmly, never seek leadership, hide brightness and cherish obscurity, get some things done).⁷ The mention of *jue bu dang tou* was of particular importance, and it meant China should not stick its head out and become a leader of the Third World. This idea obviously came from Deng Xiaoping. According to Deng, "some countries in the Third World want China to be the leader, but we should not be, and this is a fundamental national policy. We cannot be the leader, and we do not have enough power. It is no good to be the leader as you will lose initiative. China should forever stand with the Third World; China should never seek hegemony; and China should never seek leadership".⁸

Deng's thinking on China's foreign policy strategy later evolved into a "24-character" principle: "*lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu, juebu dangtou, taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei*" (observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, never seek leadership, hide brightness and cherish obscurity, get some things done), though there is another version of this, which is a "28-character" principle with the addition of *shanyu shouzhuo* (be good at protecting one's disadvantages) to the "24-character" principle. Since there is no major difference between the "24-character" and the "28-character" principles, scholars tend to use them interchangeably. By the early 2000s, TGYH had become a well-adopted strategy of China's foreign policies as more officials and scholars use this term to describe China's national policy towards the outside world.

However, the exact meaning of TGYH is heatedly debated in China and the West. For most Western observers, TGYH refers to a strategy that emphasises building one's capacities while biding time and seeking revenge when the time is ripe. Thus, most observers use the phrase "hiding capacities and biding time" when translating TGYH.⁹ Chinese General Xiong Guangkai

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jiang Zemin, *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin, II* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2003), p. 202.

⁸ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, III*, p. 363.

⁹ The most accepted translation of TGYH is in the annual report on China's military power, submitted to the US Congress by the Department of Defence. It should be noted here, however, that not all Western scholars agree with this interpretation. For example, Elizabeth Economy's translation is *hide brightness, cherish obscurity*. See "The Game Changer: Coping with China's Foreign Policy Evolution", *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2010): 142.

believes that such a translation is not only inaccurate but also dangerous because it would lead the US to misjudge China's strategic intentions. TGYH does not mean that China will wait for the right moment to promote its hidden agenda as its power continues to grow. A more accurate translation, according to General Xiong, would be analogous to "hiding its light" or "keeping a low profile".¹⁰ It seems that recently, some Western scholars have adopted Xiong's suggestion in translating TGYH.¹¹

To summarise, since its conception, the actual meaning of TGYH has undergone some changes, although all Chinese leaders, to varying degrees, have categorised it as being China's guiding principle in its foreign behaviours. To a certain degree, one can even argue that TGYH has been China's tacit grand strategy since the early 1990s. The key question now is: since China today is vastly different from what it was in the 1990s, how should China now interpret and treat TGYH?

China's Domestic Debates over TGYH

There are still heated debates about the TGYH strategy within the Chinese foreign policy establishment. The soundness and relevance of this strategy have been increasingly challenged. Although many Western observers point to these debates as evidence that China is now changing or at least reconsidering its grand strategy, the debate over the usefulness of TGYH is actually not new. It first emerged in the late 1990s; but it received little international coverage at the time.

Why Change TGYH?

Although opponents of TGYH list many faults about the TGYH, there are, in general, four main reasons why they think TGYH should be abandoned or at least modified significantly.

1. China's National Power is Rising

As many commentators have observed, China's confidence (or arrogance) has increased significantly with its relatively quick recovery from the 2008 global

¹⁰ Xiong Guangkai, *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, no. 2 (2010): 55–9. See also Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs* (Mar./Apr. 2011): 68–79.

¹¹ For example, see Elizabeth Economy, "The Game Changer: Coping with China's Foreign Policy Evolution", 2010.

financial crisis. By surpassing Japan in 2010, China is now the second largest economy in the world. With USD2.8 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, China is actively investing in foreign markets in order to gain access to raw materials and energy. Thus, it is natural that China's presence and interests in global affairs have increased as its power and influence have expanded in the last 30 years.

This changed context, some scholars believe, simply renders the old strategy of "keep[ing] a low profile" impractical, as China inevitably has to protect its interests overseas either in a proactive or passive way.¹² For instance, China had deployed four military transport aircraft and a warship to Libya to evacuate Chinese workers due to domestic unrest in Libya.¹³ One of the major advocates of an activist approach to foreign affairs is Liu Mingfu, a senior colonel at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) National Defence University. In his recent book, *The China Dream*, he argues that China should challenge the dominant position of the United States and try to replace the US as the number one power.¹⁴ Liu apparently believes that the era of US dominance is over, and as such, China should stand up and seek global leadership. Such a position undoubtedly directly challenges Deng Xiaoping's "never seek leadership and hegemony" guideline. Although Liu's views are not shared by China's top leadership, an increasing number of lower- and middle-level PLA officers advocate an assertive and even confrontational policy towards the United States and other powers that may harm China's "core national interest". Another example is Luo Yuan, a major general from the PLA Academy of Military Science, who is a strong critic of US intentions and behaviours in East Asia. He argues that all military officers should be "hawks" rather than "doves". China should have the guts to "show sword" when necessary.¹⁵ People like Liu and Luo demonstrated and advocated a more resolute and less tolerant approach towards the perceived American hegemonic behaviour such as arms sales to Taiwan, military surveillance and exercises along

¹² For instance, Peking University Professor Ye Zicheng has long argued that China should replace TGYH with a new strategy given China's increased power. See Ye Zicheng, "On 'Keeping a Low Profile' and 'Get Some Things Done'", *Pacific Journal* 1 (2002): 62–6. See also Xing Yue and Zhang Yibing, "Rethinking 'Keeping a Low Profile' Strategy", *International Observation* 6 (2006): 13–9.

¹³ See <http://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2011/03/chinas_foreign_policy> [3 Mar. 2011].

¹⁴ See Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: Hou Meiguo shidai de daguo siwei yu zhanlue dingwei* (*The China Dream: Major Power Thinking and Strategic Planning in a Post-American Era*) (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chuban gongsi [China Friendship Publishing Company], 2010).

¹⁵ "General Luo Yuan Talks about 'Tao Guang Yang Hui'", at <<http://mil.news.sohu.com/20101221/n278425807.shtml>> [10 May 2011].

the Chinese coast. In other words, on issues relating to China's core national interests, it should no longer take a low-profile stance.

In sum, opponents of TGYH believe that China's national power has already reached a point where it needs to be more proactive regardless of its intentions. Moreover, as China's national power is projected to increase in the coming years, so are China's national interests. These overseas interests need to be protected and China cannot sit passively as it did in the 1990s.¹⁶ As times have changed, China's strategy should also change.

TGYH Was a Policy of Convenience

The second reason given for discarding TGYH is the argument that Deng's TGYH was a policy of convenience, not a permanent national policy. Ye Zicheng, for example, argued that:

Around 1990, facing a unique international situation within which the East [sic] Europe was going through radical changes and the Soviet Union was collapsing, Deng Xiaoping came up with the guideline of '*lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhengjiao, chengzuo yinfu, taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei*' ... only under certain conditions such as dramatic international changes and sudden crisis should we use this guideline. Just like a person, it would be strange for a normal person to say '*lengjing guancha* and '*wenzhu zhengjiao*'.¹⁷

Ye continued to argue that China's domestic situation is now quite different from the 1990s and the government should increase transparency, thus avoiding the impression of China having hidden ambitions. Although few scholars openly endorse Ye's views, his views are echoed by many commentators and pundits who agree with him that China should possess the mentality of a major power because China's international environment has already vastly improved since the early 1990s.

TGYH Creates Confusion and Suspicion

The third reason to abandon TGYH centres on the argument that the strategy has generated confusion and even suspicion among other countries. For one, it is difficult to translate the term into exact English. Even for the Chinese, unless one has an adequate background in traditional Chinese culture, it is not

¹⁶ On China's overseas interests, see Su Changhe, "On China's Overseas Interests", *World Economics and Politics* 8 (2009): 13–20; Zhang Shuguang, "Diplomatic Management of National Overseas Interests", *World Economics and Politics* 8 (2009): 6–12.

¹⁷ Ye Zicheng, "On 'Keeping a Low Profile' and 'Get Some Things Done'", *Pacific Journal* 1 (2002): 62–6.

easy to understand the real meaning of the term. General Xiong Guangkai, former deputy chief of staff of the PLA, wrote an article discussing how the inaccurate translation of TGYH had a negative impact on Chinese foreign policy.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the term was most commonly translated as “hide our capabilities and bide our time”. Other translations have been “conceal one’s true intention” and “hide one’s ambitions and disguise its claws”. These translations, according to Xiong, have distorted the original meaning and nature of this strategy, leading to misperceptions of China’s real intentions. For example, the US defence department’s annual report on Chinese military borrows these translations to define TGYH as “strategic deception”.

The problem, however, is more than just translation. Historically and traditionally, TGYH has been associated with other similar Chinese idioms such as *woxing changdan*, which means to endure hardships when one is weak and seek revenge when the moment is right. It cannot be denied that the term connotes trick and conspiracy in traditional Chinese culture. It is hard to convince others that the term can be used in a different way. Therefore, no matter how hard the Chinese side has tried to convey the benign meaning, TGYH has become “the least likeable Chinese discourse for American and other Western leaders”.¹⁹ It is hence better to abandon this term to avoid unnecessary confusion and suspicion. Moreover, China has nothing to hide in its strategic intentions, much less is there to talk about hiding one’s light.²⁰ Others also pointed out that from the very beginning when Deng Xiaoping put across the concept, the target was the domestic, rather than international audience.²¹ Therefore, it cannot be used publicly as a declaratory diplomatic strategy towards the international community and neither can it be the subject of diplomatic exchanges.²²

TGYH is Too Soft

Some Chinese commentators regard TGYH as too soft and as hurting China’s national interests. They tend to view the US as China’s major threat, and therefore

¹⁸ Xiong Guangkai, “The Diplomatic and Strategic Implication for the Translation of ‘*Tao Guang Yang Hui*’”, *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, no. 2 (2010): 55–9.

¹⁹ Shi Yinghong, “Basic Perspective and Strategic Analysis of Sino-American Relations”, *World Economic and Political Forum*, no. 4 (2007): 11.

²⁰ Ye Zicheng, “On ‘Keeping a Low Profile’ and ‘Get Some Things Done’”, 2002; and Xing Yue and Zhang Yibing, “Rethinking ‘Keeping a Low Profile’ Strategy”, 2006.

²¹ Wang Jianwei, “China’s Rise Calls for New Diplomatic and Strategic Concepts”, *United Post*, 21 Jan. 2011.

²² “TGYH Does Not Need to be Discussed Publicly”, *Global Outlook*, 29 Dec. 2009, at <<http://word.people.com.cn/GB/1030/10672541.html>> [1 May 2011].

call for a more confrontational policy towards the US.²³ Evidence often cited to support such a position includes: (i) the repeated US sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan, thereby implicitly encouraging Taiwan independence; (ii) the continued support for the Dalai Lama and Uyghur's separatist movement; (iii) military strategies that aim to encircle China by strengthening alliances with Japan, South Korea, India and other Asian countries; (iv) economic strategies that use currency wars and other tactics to weaken China's economy; and (v) cultural policies that overly criticise China's human rights and related issues. All of these, as commentators argue, ultimately threaten China's core interests and therefore must be addressed seriously. For example, General Zhu Chenghu, another vocal hawk in the Chinese military, asserts that if the US gets involved in the military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, China would use nuclear weapons to counter-attack.²⁴

Many in China also think that Beijing should be tougher in dealing with other major powers such as Japan on issues like the Diaoyu Islands, East China Sea disputes, etc. In short, TGYH is increasingly inadequate in defending China's expanding national interests.

In fact, some scholars noticed that in practice, China's diplomacy in recent years has gradually walked out of the shadow of TGYH. In recently emphasising that China should act as a "responsible major power" and play a constructive role in world affairs, the Chinese government demonstrates a more proactive tendency in diplomacy, which further weakens the logic of TGYH.²⁵ More specifically, China has displayed unprecedented toughness and assertiveness in its diplomacy towards the US and Japan in recent years, as evident in Beijing's response to the US arms sale to Taiwan, US military surveillance and exercises in the South China Sea and East China Sea, the Japanese detention of the Chinese captain and the South China Sea disputes in 2010. In addition, Beijing no longer shies away from showcasing its more advanced military hardware to the world, sometimes even prematurely. Taking them together, there appears to be a gap between China's foreign policy concept and diplomatic practice. In other words, in reality, China is doing away with TGYH or is at least in favour of *yousuo zuowei*. In that case, it is not logical for Beijing to keep harping on TGYH while practising something else.²⁶

²³ The *Global Times*, a widely read newspaper, is the major media outlet that provides a forum for such views and comments. Interestingly, the *Global Times* also has an English version, which is not as assertive as its Chinese version.

²⁴ "China Has the Strategic Nuclear Striking Capability to Destroy the United States", at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4aadb5340100j0wq.html> [19 June 2011].

²⁵ Wang Yizhou, "Silent Revolution", *World Affairs*, no. 7 (2004): 22.

²⁶ Wang Jianwei, "China's Rise Calls for New Diplomatic and Strategic Concepts", *United Post*, 21 Jan. 2011.

Why Stick to TGYH?

Proponents of TGYH also offer four reasons why China should continue to adhere to the TGYH concept, at least for the foreseeable future, rebuking arguments made by those who think TGYH is out of date. It is observed that proponents and opponents of TGYH very often focus on different aspects of the same issue.

China's Future Power will be Limited

The first reason to oppose abandoning TGYH is a realistic assessment of China's future power. As discussed earlier, many scholars and pundits in China conclude that the US is in decline and thus, China should play a more prominent role in international affairs. Although such a view is popular among some scholars and commentators, the Chinese leadership remains cautious. As Wang Jisi noted, "prominent political figures ... argue that since China remains a developing country, it should concentrate on economic development. Without necessarily rebuffing the notion that the West, particularly the United States, is a long-term threat to China, they contend that China is not capable of challenging Western primacy for the time being".²⁷ Such a view is echoed by many other scholars in China, who also point to three additional reasons why China's future power will be limited.

First, China's ascent is for real, but US decline is far from certain. Although the global distribution of power is shifting to the East from the West, this does not mean that China's power has already caught up with the US because the US can bounce back from this relative decline quickly, just as it has in earlier periods. Second, it is true that China's hard power, measured in GDP terms, is undoubtedly increasing quickly. China surpassed Japan in 2010 as the world's second largest economy and many predict that it might overtake the US as the largest economy by around 2025. Despite this amazing growth, the size of China's GDP can be misleading. For one thing, China's GDP per capita lags far behind other advanced economies and this could limit China's overseas ambitions as pressing domestic problems such as housing, transportation, environment, employment, etc., remain China's top priorities. Thus, a large GDP does not make China a superpower.

Moreover, despite China's size in terms of GDP, it is only one, albeit very important, component of a country's comprehensive power. China still lags far behind the US in military technology, higher education systems, rule of law

²⁷ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", 2011.

and other institutions that are essential to maintaining sustainable growth. More importantly, China's economic power will not automatically translate into geopolitical influence; China has a long way to go before it can exert influence on other major powers.²⁸ Third, China's soft power is even relatively weaker. For the foreseeable future, China will not be able to offer an ideology or ideas that can replace the current international order that is mostly based on Western ideas. Although China's model of economic success is impressive, the so-called "Beijing Consensus" has very limited practical value for other developing countries such as in Latin America and Africa. The Chinese government's recent efforts to promote its soft power have produced only limited results, mostly in the form of Confucius Institutes which have been created essentially for language training. Thus, the next 10 years will be a critical period for China to truly become a great power. China should continue to practise the TGYH concept and not seek leadership or hegemony, but at the same time, it should also assume some international responsibilities in order to enhance its international reputation.²⁹

TGYH is a Long-Term National Policy

The TGYH concept is a long-term national policy, not a policy of convenience — this being the second reason why TGYH should not be abandoned. Although Deng Xiaoping coined the term in a unique context after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, it does not mean that it should be limited within that context. Some scholars point out that TGYH is not a short-term expedient measure. On the contrary, Deng articulated it as a "fundamental national policy" that China should never seek leadership (*juebu dangtou*).³⁰ Wu Jianming, a retired senior diplomat and a strong defender of TGYH, also insists that TGYH is not a tactic of convenience, citing Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's words that TGYH should be in effect for another 100 years.³¹ Others maintain that TGYH is neither a

²⁸ On the limitations of China's financial power, see Daniel Drezner, "Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Politics", *International Security* 34, no. 2 (2009): 7–45.

²⁹ Lin Limin, "China's External Strategy: New Problems, New Tasks, and New Ideas", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, no. 11 (2010): 23–4. China's Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai recently reconfirmed that China would not seek hegemony. See <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-01/16/content_11860173.htm> [1 Mar. 2011].

³⁰ Wang Zaibang, "On Creatively 'Keeping a Low Profile' and 'Getting Things Done'", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 51 (2010): 48–53; Xiao Feng, "How to Understand Comrade Xiaoping's Thinking on TGYH?", *Beijing Daily*, 6 Apr. 2010, at <<http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/11299470.html>> [12 May 2011].

³¹ Wu Jianming, "Tao Guang Yang Hui should be Needed for 100 Years", at <http://club.china.com/data/thread/12171906/2727/18/14/3_1.html> [19 June 2011].

strategy nor tactic, and neither does it have a link to whether a country is weak or strong. Zhao Qizheng, a senior government official for public diplomacy, argues that TGYH is actually a political quality, which should therefore always exist in China's diplomacy no matter how powerful China is.³²

Zhao and others also argue that despite the significantly improved international environment in China today compared to the late 1980s and early 1990s, China's stance in international affairs has not changed fundamentally as the US and other Western countries are still at odds with China on many issues. Moreover, China's peaceful rise is not complete yet, and China still needs a peaceful international environment to be able to concentrate on domestic economic and social development — the sole criterion upon which the decision to abandon TGYH would be hinged. That said, it is not an opportune moment for China to abandon TGYH. Another scholar points out that the fundamentals underlying Deng's TGYH strategy in the 1990s still remain irrespective of the big changes taking place in the world. Among other things, the imbalance of world power has not been corrected completely. Overall, China is still weaker than the West. On the other hand, although there have been problems and tensions in Sino-American relations, China is not facing any prominent danger of foreign invasion and it still enjoys the strategic opportunity available to develop itself. Therefore, the conditions for China to stay with TGYH are still valid.³³

TGYH is Not Confusing and Deceptive

Third, it might be true that TGYH is confusing and generates international suspicion, but the effective way to deal with this problem is to educate foreign observers in appreciating TGYH. As discussed earlier, many Chinese and foreign scholars wrongly equate TGYH with another famous idiom *woxin changdan* (WXCD), which means one goes through hardships to gather strength in order to revenge national or personal humiliation. However, the correct and true meaning of TGYH is simply that one should keep a low profile. Thus, TGYH is qualitatively different from WXCD as the two have very different contexts. As such, the right way is to educate foreigners so that they can grasp the correct meaning of TGYH. More important, the real question seems to be: even if China replaces TGYH with a more transparent terminology, will outsiders view China in a completely different light? It seems that China's increasing power is

³² "Zhao Qizheng: TGYH is Not a Tactic, but a Quality", at <http://big51.chinataiwan.org/wh/mrt/201105/t20110523_1865098.htm> [3 June 2011].

³³ Qu Xin, "Adhere to the Diplomatic Strategy of 'TGYH, YSZW'", *Scholarly Journal of Chinese People's University*, no. 5 (2001): 16.

the ultimate source of Western suspicion. Thus, simply changing a terminology will not do much good to China's national interests and image. Therefore, TGYH as a term should be continued rather than replaced with another term.

TGYH and YSZW are Two Sides of the Same Coin

TGYH constitutes just one part of Deng's strategy, which also encapsulates *yousuo zuowei* (YSZW) — an aspect that people tend to neglect. According to dialectics, one should not dichotomise TGYH and YSZW, both of which can be mutually complementary. Some Chinese scholars argue that the antithesis of YSZW is *wusuo zuowei* (do nothing) instead of TGYH; thus, China can be flexible in deciding between TGYH and YSZW in its foreign affairs. Under the new circumstances, emphasising one aspect of Deng's legacy (either TGYH or YSZW) is unbeneficial for China's national interests.³⁴ Moreover, TGYH does not imply that China will keep a low profile regardless of the international situation; in areas such as security and sovereignty, China has always adhered to principles of YSZW. A few Chinese scholars and analysts point out that with the changing domestic and international situation, the weight and balance of TGYH and YSZW could also change. Some have argued that China has shifted its emphasis from TGYH to YSZW in recent years. The advent of the theory of China's "peaceful rise" is an indication of such a shift.³⁵ In addition, with China's growing diplomatic clout, it has greater flexibility to decide between TGYH and YSZW depending on specific cases and circumstances.³⁶

Causes of New Thinking on TGYH

Despite all the talk about China becoming more high-profile in international affairs since 2008, it should be kept in mind that China's actions and words may have not been fundamentally different from the past. In other words, perception is not the reality. As Zhao Qizheng, spokesperson of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, said: "When

³⁴ Wang Zaibang, "On Creatively 'Keeping a Low Profile' and 'Getting Things Done'", 2010, pp. 48–53.

³⁵ Gao Fei, "From Tao Guang Yang Hui to Peaceful Rise — China's Tactic Adjustment in Diplomacy", *Pacific Journal*, no. 11 (2006): 7–13; Jiao Ping, "Chinese Diplomatic New Thinking: From 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' to 'You Suo Zuo Wei'", *Hubei Social Science*, no. 10 (2005): 101–3.

³⁶ Li Guohuan, "Peaceful Development — New Development of Deng Xiaoping's International Strategic Thinking on 'TGYH, YSZW'", *Study of Mao Zedong Thought*, no. 1 (2006): 120.

a country is weak, not many listen carefully to everything you say. But as the nation gets stronger, even the same words will have a very different impact. That's why some foreigners feel China's attitude is different".³⁷

However, if perception reflects the reality, then there are both domestic and international causes of China's current new debates over the role of the TGYH strategy in Chinese foreign policy. Domestically, there are four main factors that shape the debate about TGYH; and internationally, there are two main factors.

Domestic Factors

The foremost domestic factor is the increasingly complex structure of foreign policymaking in China. There are more actors involved now than before in China's foreign policymaking processes, which will lead to three possible outcomes: (i) conflicting interests will arise; (ii) the coordination problem will become more widespread and serious; and (iii) the central government's control over policymaking actors will weaken.

First, conflicting interests among major actors within China's foreign policy will arise, and this is partly because China's interests and presence in global affairs have expanded rapidly in recent years. For example, as a result of the country's huge demand for energy, China's major oil companies, such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Sinopec and others, now have huge investments and operations in remote areas of Africa and Latin America. Thus, it becomes very critical for the Chinese government to protect these new overseas interests, but traditional players like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are ill-equipped to deal with social and economic issues in foreign cultures. However, the interests of big oil companies are sometimes not necessarily consistent with China's national interests and images. There have been media reports of mistreatment of local people by Chinese companies in Africa, thus damaging China's national image in Africa.

Second, the coordination problem among different players will become more difficult to resolve. As China does not have an overarching institution such as the National Security Council in the US to oversee and coordinate foreign policy actions by different departments and ministries, different ministries will sometimes give inconsistent and even conflicting signals regarding a particular foreign policy or event. In general, the more actors get involved in foreign policy decision-making, the more difficult it is to coordinate, given the fact that different ministries have different sources of information and analytical

³⁷ See <<http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20110302/115431.shtml>> [12 May 2011].

skills. In Wang Jisi's words: "Almost all institutions in the central leadership and local governments are involved in foreign relations to varying degrees, and it is virtually impossible for them to envisage China's national interest in the same perspective or to speak with one voice".³⁸ Third, although the central government has traditionally controlled foreign affairs in a tight fashion, this control has weakened as Chinese society has become more pluralistic with more voices in foreign policy decision-making. Two voices of particular importance come from two groups, i.e., public opinion and the military.

These three factors in combination make China's foreign policymaking more uncertain and unpredictable. More voices imply there will be assertive and even confrontational approaches to international affairs. The debate over TGYH is just one aspect of this broader trend towards pluralistic foreign policies.

The second factor that complicates China's foreign policy is the rise of nationalism and public opinion. Many observers have pointed to the increasingly important role of domestic public opinion in shaping and even determining Chinese foreign policy. Although China is not yet a democracy and top leaders are not accountable to the general public in the way that their democratic counterparts are, the leadership undoubtedly pays extra attention to how the Chinese public thinks about foreign relations, particularly in the era of the Internet. In recent years, online nationalism has become a powerful force that sometimes puts constraints on the government's behaviour and attitudes towards Japan and the US especially because the Chinese government itself might become the target if its stance is viewed as too soft.³⁹ TGYH has become a frequent target of criticisms on the Internet whenever the Chinese government shows weakness in dealing with other countries.⁴⁰

The third factor is the rising influence of the PLA in China's foreign affairs. In recent years, one notable change in China's foreign policy decision-making processes is the increasingly bolder and more assertive voice of the PLA. For one thing, the PLA has been given more resources, as attested by the double-digit increase in the annual budget in recent years.⁴¹ There are also signs that the central government is sometimes not fully aware of what the PLA's action plan or moves are. For instance, during his recent visit to China, the US Secretary of Defence

³⁸ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", 2011.

³⁹ Wang Jun, "Online Nationalism, Civil Society and Chinese Diplomacy", *World Economics and Politics*, no. 10 (2010): 141-55.

⁴⁰ There are some very active chatrooms organised by military fans and they are closely monitored by the government. See *ibid.*

⁴¹ The PLA's 2011 budget will increase 12.7 per cent. See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/04/c_13761057.htm> [12 Apr. 2011].

Robert Gates asked Chinese President Hu Jintao about the first test flight of China's stealth fighter.⁴² However, Hu seemed unaware of the test flight that had taken place only hours earlier. This episode showed the complicated relationship between civilian leaders and the military, though this does not necessarily mean that the central government is losing control over the military.

The final factor that complicates matters is the ongoing power competition in the central government in the lead-up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Given the broader context of rising nationalism and confidence, officials jockeying for positions now and then will lose points if they are perceived as being too soft when negotiating with the US. Thus, this power competition is providing incentives for potential candidates to act and talk in an assertive way.

Domestic factors alone, despite their importance, cannot explain the current shift in China's thinking on TGYH because international factors are equally important, if not more important. Two major international factors, namely structural and the US behaviour towards China, affect the debate over TGYH.

International Factors

The first international factor is a structural change in international politics, i.e., the shift in balance of power in China's favour. As discussed, China's national power has risen to a point where no major power can ignore China anymore. Even though China still lags behind the US in many areas, some major structural trends favour China in the coming decades. Many Chinese commentators have possibly overestimated China's power by underestimating American power; nonetheless, the dominant perception is that China will continue to grow and will not be content with the current distribution of status and influence. As many realists argue, China's current attitude and behaviour are perfectly predictable as China is merely acting the way that any major power would, such as the US. In fact, offensive realists would argue that China's rise will not be peaceful at all and TGYH will soon be replaced by a more offensive strategy.⁴³ An increasing number of Chinese scholars and analysts are also accepting the logic of offensive realism, believing that whether China sticks to TGYH or not, some forms of conflict between the two countries are inevitable.

⁴² See <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/12/world/asia/12fighter.html?_r=1> [13 Apr. 2011].

⁴³ The leading offensive realist is John Mearsheimer. For his more recent analysis, see John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia", *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381-96.

Even moderate scholars such as Wang Jisi, one of China's most prominent international relations scholars, suggested that because of the structural contradictions, some forms of strategic competition between the two countries seem unavoidable.⁴⁴

The second international stimulus, as an expression of the first, is the US return to Asia since President Obama came to power. As many Chinese commentators are well aware, the US is the only major power that can delay or even derail China's rise. Whatever the US does in East Asia will affect how China thinks about its grand strategy. While America's "return to Asia" under the Obama administration was somewhat expected as the region was largely neglected by the Bush administration due to its preoccupation of the "war on terror", Beijing was still surprised by the intensity, speed, and high vocality of such a return. Particularly since 2010, a series of events in East Asia has given the US opportunities to strengthen its ties not only with traditional allies such as Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, but also new partners such as Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and India. In China's eyes, Washington is forming a broad coalition to encircle China. The US took positions on territorial disputes on the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea in favour of Japan and the ASEAN countries, sent aircraft carrier USS George Washington to the Yellow Sea to conduct military exercises ostensibly in response to North Korea's attack on South Korea, and so on. These actions deeply angered the Chinese elite and public alike. They wonder if it still makes sense for China to continue practising the TGYH approach while the US and its allies do not at all.

Whither China's TGYH Strategy?

Since its articulation by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin in the late 1980s and early 1990s, TGYH has guided China's foreign affairs for almost two decades. Yet with China's miraculous rapid economic growth, and to a lesser extent, the expansions in its military might, the conception of strategy when China was both internally and externally weak would be inevitably questioned and challenged both conceptually as well as practically. An adjustment is therefore just a matter of time. Compared with the American and Japanese response to the current global financial crisis, China's strong role in reversing the current negative economic tide bolsters opinion in China that Deng Xiaoping's TGYH

⁴⁴ Wang Jisi, "Sino-American Structural Contradictions are on Rise and Strategic Competition Difficult to Avoid", in *International and Strategic Studies Report*, 23 July 2010 (Beijing: Center for International and Strategic Studies, Peking University).

policy is becoming increasingly awkward. Some government officials, opinion leaders and the public, particularly netizens, are convinced that "China is now at the centre of the world stage"⁴⁵ and as a result, it can take high-profile and more assertive actions in international affairs to defend its perceived interests. Beijing's robust responses to a series of events related to Sino-American relations and its peripheral postures in 2010 at least partially indicate such a mentality among the Chinese.

This change of self-perception is also reflected at the conceptual level. One notable change in China's current thinking on TGYH is the recent decision made by the Chinese leadership to modify Deng's TGYH strategy. Chinese leader Hu Jintao declared that China should adopt a "continuously keep a low profile and proactively get some things done" strategy.⁴⁶ Although what differentiates this new strategy from the old TGYH strategy is the addition of two adverbs — "continuously" and "proactively" — the significance cannot be underestimated. According to scholars and officials who are familiar with the top decision-making processes, to "proactively get some things done" is the emphasis of the new strategy. One possible reason to retain TGYH is that abandoning it might cause unnecessary international suspicions.⁴⁷ This also explains why the new enhanced strategy has not appeared in any official documents, though some scholarly articles and newspaper reports began to use it to describe China's new strategic guideline. As a recent report in *Outlook Weekly* magazine states: "The central government's emphasis on 'continuously and proactively' is significant, indicating a sober understanding of the international situation and China's own power".⁴⁸

Indeed, the Chinese leadership's view about China's proper grand strategy and balance between TGYH and YSZW became even more sober in late 2010 after China's more assertive diplomacy met some resistance from the US, Japan, South Korea and some ASEAN countries. Some evidence suggests that the top Chinese leaders realised that the time had not yet arrived to bring about drastic changes to Deng Xiaoping's TGYH legacy. This is also apparent in a couple of

⁴⁵ Liu Ming, "China's Diplomatic Thinking Needs a Breakthrough", *United Post*, Mar. 2010.

⁴⁶ Zhu Weilie points out that this is a new guideline. Zhu Weilie, "Tao Guang Yang Hui: A Shared Idea of World Civilisations", 2010.

⁴⁷ So far, there have not been any official documents that put this new strategy in writing. Personal interviews with various officials and scholars confirm this significant change.

⁴⁸ See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-11/06/c_12745081.htm> [8 Mar. 2011].

major articles published by top foreign and military affairs officials, including State Councillor Dai Bingguo and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ma Xiaotian in late 2010. Dai, in his article, which was published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, painstakingly reiterated and explained China's strategic intention of taking the path of peaceful development, which means it will seek harmony and development internally, and peace and cooperation externally. For the first time, Dai publicly mentioned the TGYH discourse, dismissing the Western suspicion that it is a conspiracy when China was still weak. In fact, TGYH is consistent with the path of peaceful development, meaning China will not seek leadership, expansion and hegemony. Accordingly, Dai defined China's "core interests" in a narrow and vague sense rather than in specific terms including the following: first, China's political stability which means the stability of the CCP leadership and of the socialist system; second, China's sovereignty security, territorial integrity and national unification, which refer to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang; and third, the basic assurance for China's sustainable economic and social development.⁴⁹ Ma, in his article, emphasised that despite facing mounting external pressures, China is still in the period of "strategic opportunities" in which China's top priority is to maintain stability and develop itself. In doing so, China should avoid conflicts and attacks from all directions. Ma's fundamental judgement is that the changing situation in China's periphery may complicate matters considerably, but has not significantly affected China's period of strategic opportunities and it is possible for China to maintain an overall favourable peripheral environment.⁵⁰

These views are also echoed by other Chinese scholars. In a recent article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Wang Jisi opines that "China will remain preoccupied with the country's economic and social development, including its foreign policy".⁵¹ Another very active international relations scholar in China, Zhu Feng, argues that China's "core interests" should not be too broadly defined, particularly if it concerns the South China Sea issues. He also points out the risks of a discourse gaining ground in China that views the US only as a hegemon with suspicious intentions towards China.⁵²

⁴⁹ Dai Bingguo, "Adhering to the Path of Peaceful Development", at <<http://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/zyxw/t774662.htm>> [9 Mar. 2011].

⁵⁰ Ma Xiaotian, "Grasping the Timely Meaning of the Strategic Opportunity Period and Clarifying our Historical Mission and Duties", *Study Times*, 17 Jan. 2011, at <<http://military.people.com.cn/GB/1076/52984/13749859.html>> [10 Mar. 2011].

⁵¹ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", 2011.

⁵² See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/herald/2011-01/10/c_13683711.htm> [12 Apr. 2011].

Thus, it is fair to say that Deng Xiaoping's TGYH strategy has been tested in recent years in China at both the conceptual and policy levels. The heated debate among scholars and analysts indicates the increasing dissatisfaction among the Chinese foreign and defence policy elites regarding the validity and feasibility of TGYH. This is also reflected in the policy and behavioural domains. China's attempts to change or at least modify the rules of the game in a range of issues and the visible confidence and assertiveness in its diplomacy indicate Beijing's tendency to redefine TGYH in substance, which has yet to be conceptualised. Nevertheless, the regional and international backlash caused by China's more aggressive diplomatic moves apparently made the Chinese leaders pause. Their recent efforts to reassure the outside world about their benign intentions and the continuity of their policy seem to suggest that the Chinese leadership is unlikely to abandon TGYH in the foreseeable future because any significant departure from it would create confusion and suspicion among China's neighbouring countries in Asia, thus driving them into the arms of the US and complicating China's peripheral environment. What happened in 2010 regarding the South China Sea is a case in point. In early 2010, some Chinese officials and commentators, for the first time, began to refer to the South China Sea as one of China's core interests, thus creating tensions between China and some Southeast Asian countries and between China and the US. Evidently, the Chinese government has learnt a lesson from this episode, concluding that now is not the time to overly stress the YSZW approach. As Wang Jisi pointed out in 2011, "last year, some Chinese commentators reportedly referred to the South China Sea and North Korea as such (China's core interests), but these reckless statements, made with no official authorisation, created a great deal of confusion".⁵³

Conclusion

From these cursory discussions about the TGYH debate, three conclusions can be drawn. First, fierce debate over the nature and value of TGYH is ongoing within China. An emerging consensus is that China should largely continue to adhere to Deng Xiaoping's minimal approach towards world affairs, but it needs to play a greater role and become more active in international affairs since simply maintaining a low profile will not serve China's national interests and image. In this sense, TGYH as the *de facto* diplomatic strategy simply cannot be mechanically assimilated in its original meaning without adapting to China's new

⁵³ Ibid.

power position in the world and the subsequent new international environment it faces. A gradual and incremental shift of balance between TGYH and YSZW is expected to happen, as is evident from the new slogan "Stick with TGYH and actively pursue YSZW (proactively get some things done)". As General Ma Xiaotian put it, striving for stability and safety does not mean China should do nothing during the strategic opportunity period. On the contrary, YSZW is equally important. Sustaining and prolonging China's strategic opportunity period sometimes involves fierce competition and contention. China should be ready to compete when necessary.⁵⁴

Second, the debate over TGYH in China did not simply happen by accident. Neither is it accidental that debate on China's grand strategy intensified after China became the second largest economy in the world and the US suffered greatly from the global financial crisis. Rather, it reflects the power transition process of China's role in international affairs. During this power transition process, China faces both opportunities and challenges, possesses both strengths and weaknesses, and needs to resist temptations as well as watch out for pitfalls. Under such circumstances, it is only natural that one may hear loud "noise" from Chinese society with respect to China's position and role in international affairs. Various social and interest groups also try to assert their opinion and influence policy orientation and outcomes. In this regard, China's foreign policy is simply an extension of China's domestic economic and social development. On the one hand, the robust economic growth and increasing economic clout and military might have given Chinese leaders and officials a stronger rationale to be confident and assertive. On the other hand, mounting domestic problems have made them more cautious and hesitant to dramatically change China's course of foreign policy.

Third, China's top leadership, which believes that domestic problems should preoccupy China for many more years and which recognises that a declining US is still powerful (and will remain so for a long time) is more clear-headed than lower-level government officials, some military and academic elites, and the public on China's national power and the international situation.⁵⁵ It is also admittedly true that consciously or subconsciously, the Chinese government did not do enough to rein in China's nationalist and hawkish sentiments and external behaviour until it became clear that the negative reaction from the international

⁵⁴ Ma Xiaotian, "Grasping the Timely Meaning of the Strategic Opportunity Period and Clarifying our Historical Mission and Duties", 2011.

⁵⁵ See Joseph S. Nye Jr, "The Future of American Power", *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2010): 2-12.

community could endanger and impact Beijing's larger foreign policy goals. Another possible case is that the Chinese leadership wants to test the waters before forming a new grand strategy. The debate also shows that China's foreign policy orientation is still in great flux and no clear direction has been set. While TGYH has been criticised for its inadequacy and, obsolescence, etc., critics can seldom offer a viable alternative.⁵⁶ The next 10 years will be a critical period to test whether China will eventually abandon the TGYH strategy, assuming the country will continue to grow economically, militarily and politically. From a scholarly viewpoint, a set of indicators should be designed to empirically measure China's words and actions to assess to what extent TGYH is still effective in Chinese foreign policy.

⁵⁶ Wang Jisi, in his recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, suggested that a more sophisticated grand strategy is needed to serve China's domestic priorities. But he did not outline this strategy and only discussed four ongoing changes in China's strategic thinking that may serve as the foundation for a new grand strategy. Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", 2011.