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China's New Foreign Minister Faces New Challenges
by Jianwei Wang

While the United States prepared for war with Iraq, China quietly completed a smooth transition from the "third generation" to the "fourth generation" of leaders. Among the personnel changes at the 10th National People's Congress was the selection of Li Zhaoxing, a veteran "America hand" and former ambassador to the United States, as China's foreign minister. Li's election signifies that Sino-U.S. relations are still the "key within key" in the new leadership's foreign policy. Li has experienced both ups and downs in this turbulent relationship. People still remember his stern criticism of Washington in the U.S. media during the crisis triggered by the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Yugoslav war. Li, nicknamed by some the "Red Guard ambassador," is known by others as the "poetic diplomat." He likes to write poems during his leisure time and has even published a collection of his work. These two dimensions of his personality may well reflect his diplomatic style: frank and firm, but not without subtlety and imagination.

A sophisticated balancing act is exactly what China's foreign policy needs today. The new foreign minister inherited a largely positive diplomatic legacy from his predecessor, Tang Jiaxuan, who was promoted to State Councilor. With its robust economy as a backdrop, China has maintained or restored good relations with major powers, particularly the United States; vigorously pursued a regional economic diplomacy in East Asia; enhanced its profile in international organizations and regimes; and reached out its diplomatic antenna all over the world. Yet Li faces new challenges resulting not only from the post-Cold War era, but more importantly also from post-Sept. 11 circumstances. The dramatic American response to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks continues to cause profound geopolitical changes in world politics. China, like other major powers, has been struggling to find its position in this new U.S.-dominated world order in which America has a heightened sensitivity to its own national security.

Li's first and pre-eminent challenge is to maintain the positive momentum in U.S.-China relations after Sept. 11. The tragedy turned U.S. attention away from China as a potential adversary to international terrorism, a shift that facilitated the improvement of the relationship. Various thorny security and political issues in the bilateral relationship have been managed, if not resolved. Yet the unfolding and expanding U.S. war on terror infused new complications and frictions into the relationship. Among other things, far more than in the past, U.S.-China relations are haunted by "third party" issues over which both countries have much less control. Beijing needs to balance between maintaining a good relationship with Washington and not sacrificing its traditional allies and values. On the Iraqi issue, China long ago decided to "stand aside." The unexpected revolt of France, Germany, as well as Russia, put China in an awkward position. Beijing did not want to confront Washington on behalf of Iraq. Nevertheless it is also uncomfortable about giving up all its credentials in the fight against anti-hegemonism to other powers. It is interesting to note that when U.S. hegemony seems to have reached its peak in the post-Cold War period, the term "anti-hegemonism," which was so prevalent in Chinese official media, all but disappeared.

A far more serious test of Li's diplomatic savvy is the North Korean nuclear crisis. Here China is caught between a rock and a hard place. Just like the Korean War, this unwanted episode might once again derail China's relations with Washington and damage China's national interest. If left unresolved or if it intensifies, this crisis could resume the suspended shift of U.S. strategic priority from Europe to Asia. The U.S. military has already started sending long-range bombers and other military hardware to the region. U.S.-Japanese cooperation in ballistic missile defense has gained new momentum. The once-dead proposal of establishing a separate U.S. Northeast Asian Command is floating around again, which could include the Korean Peninsula as well as Taiwan. The crisis could also rekindle the "China bashing" in the U.S. that died down after Sept. 11. The U.S. public's frustration with the intransigence of North Korea could easily be translated into dissatisfaction with the perceived Chinese passivity in managing the crisis. Quite a few Congressman and political pundits have blamed China for the deadlock. Finally, the crisis could trigger a nuclear chain reaction in countries on China's periphery, particularly Japan and South Korea. Some American political heavyweights, such as Sen. John McCain, now advocate Japan becoming a nuclear power, thus putting pressure on Beijing. Soon after the U.S. military action in Iraq is over, the North Korea issue will become more salient. George Bush is likely to take on Kim Jong-il as implied in his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. Li does not have a big window of opportunity for a breakthrough in resolving this crisis.

The challenges facing the new foreign minister are not just overseas. The domestic political landscape in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates is also evolving. With former President Jiang Zemin clinging to his position as chairman of the all powerful Central Military Commission, a separation of power between domestic affairs and foreign affairs seems likely with Party Secretary General Hu Jingtao and Premier Wen Jiabao taking charge of daily economic and party affairs and Jiang retaining final say in foreign and defense policy. Administratively Li is responsible to Wen, but he may also have to listen to Jiang behind the scenes. Although historically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been

more an organ for implementing rather than making foreign policy, the possible emergence of two power centers will not help Li enhance his autonomy and authority. In addition, Li has a lot to do to improve the image of the Foreign Ministry: it is often criticized by the public as too soft in dealing with Americans and Japanese. Ironically, Li's tough demeanor may work to his advantage.

Given his age, Li is unlikely to serve more than one term and time is not on his side. If he wants to leave an imprint on China's foreign policy, he needs to become immediately engaged rather than enjoy a "wait-and-see" period. His active telephone diplomacy with other major powers shortly after he was elected suggests that he understands the urgency of his mission.

Jianwei Wang is a professor of political science, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and senior research associate, Shanghai Institute for American Studies and Shanghai Center for RimPac Strategic and International Studies. He is the author of Limited Adversaries: Post-Cold War Sino-American Mutual Images *(Oxford University Press, 2000). He can be reached at j2wang@uwsp.edu*