

China Leadership Monitor

CLM Insights Interview:

Susan L. Shirk, author of *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*

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Susan Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*. Oxford University Press. (October 2022), 424 pp. ISBN-10-0190068515; ISBN-13-978-0190068516

You devote a considerable portion of the book to analyzing domestic political factors, such as the distribution of power at the top, institutional dynamics, and worldviews of Chinese leaders. How did domestic factors contribute to China’s overreach in foreign policy?

Many international relations experts believe that China started overreaching – harming itself by seeking to gain too much – when its power gap with the United States and other Western countries narrowed. They assert that the shifting balance of power made conflict with the dominant power inevitable. I challenge this mechanistic approach and show how Chinese politicians competing in a particular institutional environment – first collective leadership and then centralized personalistic leadership – caused them to lose the restraint that had enabled China to rise peacefully and start overreaching. None of it was inevitable; nor is the future inevitable.

You argue that China’s “overreach” actually started under Hu Jintao, not Xi Jinping. Can you explain what precipitated China’s foreign policy “overreach” under Hu? Are there crucial differences in terms of objectives, strategy and tactics, and consequences between Hu’s policy and Xi’s policy?

This is the biggest surprise of my book. The first signs of overreach began even before the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and in a collective leadership that I had expected to act with restraint because of its decision-making by consensus. When in 2006-8 I first observed Chinese law enforcement ships and fishing boats shouldering and ramming Vietnamese and Philippines ships, and even confronting the American navy, to press Chinese claims in the South China Sea, I was puzzled. The South China Sea up until then had not been a focal point of popular nationalism. Moreover, these actions were damaging China’s security and sully China’s image as a responsible rising power. What was going on? My research found that the decision-making dynamic under Hu Jintao’s collective leadership didn’t produce restraint. Instead the dispersed power in the top echelons of the CCP spurred the bureaucracies under them to hype threats and overdo their actions, ostensibly to defend China but additionally to boost their power and budgets. Then the politicians in the Politburo Standing Committee reciprocally endorsed one another’s actions in a form of “logrolling.”

The dynamic driving overreach in Xi Jinping’s centralized personalistic leadership is very different. Xi’s massive campaign against corrupt and disobedient officials, begun in 2013 and continuing to the present, is also a purge of his rivals, real and imagined. This purge has put tremendous pressure on all officials to protect their careers by demonstrating their loyalty to the leader. They jump on the bandwagon early behind Xi’s policies and “over-comply” by

implementing them in a version that may be even more extreme than what Xi originally intended. What's more, subordinates don't dare report up the ladder the costs of Xi's arbitrary choices. The information feedback loops have broken down just as they did during Mao Zedong's rule.

Most of us would associate China's "overreach" only with foreign policy. But you also analyze its "overreach" on the domestic front. Do you see the same factors responsible for China's foreign policy overreach at play here?

My analysis of China's overreach during the Hu Jintao collective leadership was inspired by international relations theorist Jack Snyder's classic study, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, of logrolling by bureaucratic interest groups and overexpansion in pre-World War II Germany and Japan. But then I saw that significant shifts in Chinese domestic policy were occurring at the same time (2006–8) as the shift from restraint to overreach in foreign policy. By extending Snyder's framework to domestic policy making, I could make sense of the Chinese party-state's sharp intensification of social control – including *weiwen* (stability maintenance) through grid management and tightened censorship of the media and Internet – that occurred in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and that still has not loosened. The framework also helped me explain the restoration of the state's domination of the economy to promote indigenous innovation beginning in 2006.

One puzzle after reading your book seems to be the marginal role of Chinese nationalism in driving China's "overreach." Is China's "overreach" mainly if not exclusively driven by the top leadership?

My earlier book, *China: Fragile Superpower* (2008) focuses on the popular nationalism toward Japan and Taiwan that was stimulated by the combination of the CCP's patriotic education campaign under Jiang Zemin and the emergence of commercial media and the internet. But popular nationalism could not explain the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea under Hu Jintao, so I searched for another explanation related to the institutional dynamics of policy making at the top. Moreover, we see significant periods of moderation in Beijing's policies toward Japan and Taiwan, indicating to me that the top leadership can manage popular nationalism if it so chooses.

China has encountered strong pushback from the West, in particular the U.S., in the last five years. Where do you believe the West has acted proportionally and effectively? Where has it reacted disproportionately or counterproductively? Is there evidence that China is now moderating its "overreach" on the external front?

The last chapter of the book offers suggestions to Beijing and Washington on how to stem the downward spiral of relations. Fifteen years of overreach by China's leaders have incited a forceful reaction from the U.S. and other Western countries. The Biden administration came into office intending to revise the Trump administration's confrontational strategy toward China, but it finds itself instead perpetuating it, using competition with China to win bipartisan support for an ambitious and expensive legislative agenda of self-renewal. Taking advantage of the rivalry with China, Biden is challenging Congress to prove that democracies can perform better than autocracies. Hearing both Democratic and Republican administrations inveighing against China, the public naturally has become more suspicious of it. As anti-China attitudes become inflamed, it is increasingly difficult for policymakers to think sensibly about the cost-benefit trade-offs of their policies.

But China's overreach doesn't have to lead to overreaction by America.

We have no choice but to coexist with a Communist Party-led China in the foreseeable future. Therefore, we need a strategy to influence China's decision-making calculus so that it acts in ways that are less detrimental to the U.S. and other countries. We need to test whether Xi Jinping's regime, despite its proclivity for rash risk-taking, can be influenced by smart diplomacy that includes negotiations as well as pressure and sanctions. Sanctions should only be imposed as part of a diplomatic strategy aimed at changing Chinese behavior; otherwise they signal a hostile containment strategy that robs Beijing of any motivation to moderate its behavior. Frustrating as they may be, negotiations also test our assumptions about the Xi regime and provide vital information for updating our China strategy.

At present, there are hints that Xi and other top leaders may have realized that the costs of overreaching – including not only the international backlash but also the domestic economic problems, such as the unemployment caused by the crackdown on private business and the extreme zero-COVID policy and its sudden collapse – require some policy adjustments. American diplomacy should explore the opportunity to reinforce this incentive to adjust policy. Only if a serious diplomatic effort fails should Americans conclude that the sole option is to degrade and defeat China. Moreover, China's domestic dynamics during Xi's third term are unpredictable, and Xi will not be in charge forever. Dealing with China in a respectful manner that connotes goodwill toward the Chinese people will provide a foundation for a more stable relationship in the future.