China’s foreign policy tends to be viewed from two competing perspectives. Those familiar with China’s culture and history, subscribe to the thesis of China’s uniqueness. In their view, China – perhaps due to Confucianism – developed a different pattern of interacting with the rest of the world (a tributary system) and found it challenging to adapt to the European balance-of-power system. Consequently, China has to be treated differently (rules applicable to interacting with most states do not apply here) and needs to be socialized into the modern state system (with the assistance of ‘Western’ intermediaries, who command respect in China supposedly due to their knowledge of Chinese traditions and history).

The other perspective on China tends to dismiss the uniqueness of Chinese experience and considers China in a realist context as a threat to the regional or global geopolitical stability. ‘China as a threat’ thesis is not new (fear of China and the Chinese goes back to the 19th century), but it gained greater credibility in recent years when China’s economic growth coincided with its assertive foreign policy. Examples of Beijing’s military modernization, militant approaches to the territorial problems (in the East and South China Seas), expansionist economic diplomacy (particularly in Africa, but also in the South Pacific and South America) and support for so-called rogue states/regimes (North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, and most recently Syria) all seemingly confirm that China’s rising economic clout means trouble for the ‘free world’ and China’s expanding power needs to be contained.

The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPGRC or the University of Adelaide.

Contact:
Email: ipgrc@adelaide.edu.au
Both approaches to dealing with China are problematic. There is sufficient historical evidence suggesting that imperial China’s interaction with the near or more distant abroad followed a balance-of-power pattern (complete with military interventions), rather than relied on tributary arrangements. Similarly, a fear of China’s assertiveness is founded on faulty assumptions that it is a relatively recent phenomenon (related to China’s rising economic power) and that China’s interests are best served by complying with the United States’ foreign policy objectives. One should be reminded that post-1949 New China pursued an assertive diplomacy that (often successfully) challenged the superpowers until the end of the Cold War. Beijing’s carefully staged avoidance of open conflicts with major powers during the first post-Cold War decade was as much motivated by the Tiananmen effect (post-1989 international isolation) as by its focus on domestic development and stability. It heralded neither a permanent reorientation of China’s foreign policy nor the alignment of China’s diplomatic objectives with those of the United States (or any other power).

What are the implications of the above for Australia? First, China does not need foreign intermediaries (however skilled in Chinese language) to mediate its relations with the rest of the world. It also does not need foreigners (however good intentioned) to lecture it on the preferred domestic or foreign policies. Second, its diplomatic assertiveness is neither recent nor the result of economic growth. Communist China has pursued an ‘independent foreign policy’ since 1949 with varying degrees of success, but consistently in line with its perceived national interests (not the interests of other powers). Beijing’s current focus on domestic issues (economic growth and social stability) and peaceful ‘near-abroad’ bodes well for its willingness to cooperate with other powers on regional and global issues. Its self-appointed leadership of the developing world will further strengthen its cooperative approach. While cooperative on some (if not most) issues, China will remain assertive on others (particularly those identified as ‘core interests’). China’s partners (including Australia) must learn to live with China that shifts between cooperation and assertiveness and develop responses that neither demonize China nor turn it into a unique case that warrants a special treatment.

**IPGRC Research Mission**

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.