

is certainly space to expand upon the empirics here and weave these into the book. Nevertheless, it was a methodological judgment call on my part to focus more on the interview data and have the appendix serve as a complementary and supplementary resource—providing additional context and evidence to support the arguments and as a foil for my interview questions.

Next, she asks about the definition of assertiveness present in the book. In *China's Rising Foreign Ministry*, I operationalized assertiveness as “the tendency to leverage one's resources to impose costs on others to extract compliance and/or police behavior”. I agree that this may not necessarily capture “positive” aspects of Chinese diplomacy. While my book's aim was to examine the negative aspects of assertiveness; per Zhang, there is scope for more engagement regarding “positive” diplomacy which I hope to take on in future work.

Finally, Zhang asked about the dynamics of different actors evaluating Chinese diplomatic practices differently. She points out that there are international and domestic impacts when Chinese diplomacy is driven by the need to show political allegiance. Indeed, Chinese “wolf warrior” diplomacy is well received at home but encroaches on western diplomatic sensibilities abroad, leading to mismatches of perceptions for both “competence” and “assertiveness”. How PRC diplomats selectively respond to claims of assertiveness—explaining, defending, and even embracing it—is intriguing but one that I did not consider here.

China's diplomacy is a fast-moving and evolving phenomenon, there is certainly more work to be done to better understand the various aspects of China's foreign ministry and its diplomats. Like Zhang's fascinating work in *China's Gambit*, this book hopes to advance the literature on Chinese foreign policy, with a fresh take on its diplomats and diplomacy.

**China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion.** By Ketian Zhang.  
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Ketian Zhang's *China's Gambit* is a timely, theoretically rich, and accessible book that investigates the “why” and “when” of China's coercion decisions to perceived threats. The book persuasively argues that China's decisions to use coercion are based on a careful calculation of costs and benefits, where the need to “demonstrate resolve” is weighed against potential economic and geopolitical consequences (pp. 9–10). Contrary to popular belief, China tends to favor non-military coercion, rather than military responses. Indeed, Chinese leaders employ a range of coercive tools including military, economic, political,

and grey-zone measures. As the author argues, the growing use of nonmilitary tactics like economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure suggests these strategies may be equally, if not more, effective in achieving desired outcomes (p. 3). Importantly, Zhang also provides empirical evidence of specific cases when China does not coerce—thus accounting for both the *absence* and *presence* of coercive behavior.

There are important theoretical interventions in the book. Zhang introduces cost-balancing theory where the centrality of reputation for resolve is weighed against economic costs and issue importance which in turn, determines coercion decisions (p. 30). As a foil, she highlights alternative approaches—leadership dynamics, bureaucratic politics, structural realism, and nationalism—that could also affect coercion calculations. She argues, however, that the economic costs and the geopolitical backlash that may arise from coercion decisions are significant beyond the aforementioned factors. She correctly points out that military coercion is a costly signal (p. 42) and that is why an analytical turn to a “full spectrum of coercion”, including non-military means is crucial to understanding how China coerces and why it coerces (p. 14). At the same time, she contends that establishing a reputation for resolve is critical for states to assert their national security interests to be perceived as credible. In that way, coercion is employed not only to influence the target but also to signal potential adversaries (pp. 19–20).

She examines four case studies in methodical fashion—1) South China Sea, 2) East China Sea, 3) Taiwan, and 4) Tibet—to exemplify the theoretical framework. In each of those cases, she details, rigorously, the variations in coercion decisions by China. In the South China Sea case, she investigates three subcases and found temporal and cross-national variations in China's coercive choices. For example, there are cross-national differences where China coerced the Philippines the most, followed by Vietnam, but exercised only “mild” coercion against Malaysia. Zhang finds that the quest to establish resolve is the strongest in the Philippines case whereas the Malaysian experience presents itself as having high geopolitical and economic costs while the need to establish resolve is lower.

For the East China Sea example, she observes that the need to establish resolve is “low in the pre-2005 period” but turned “high in the post-2005 period, and peaked around 2015, before decreasing” (p. 102). Thus, in the 2010 “boat clash incident”, China needed to show resolve and used non-militarized coercion as the clash got increasingly publicized while economic costs remained low. In the case of Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012, the need to establish resolve was demonstrably higher as the move by Tokyo was seen as provocative and detrimental to Beijing's interests. As such,

coercion was again used even as these remained non-military responses.

For Taiwan, which is seen as a “core” interest, she likewise points out that there are variations to China’s responses to perceived threats. Indeed, during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis, China used military coercion due to “high issue importance”, while the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in 1992 did not elicit coercion due to economic dependency on the U.S. and high geopolitical costs. Zhang argues that in the post-2008 landscape, China has been quite moderate and “used very selective sanctions and coercion against the United States in the post-2008 period” even as China’s military pressure on Taiwan itself has increased discernibly (p. 156). Here, one wonders if indirect military coercion (via Taiwan) ought to be factored into the calculus in coercion decisions vis-à-vis the United States? Was “moderate coercion” an option because military coercion was used directly on Taiwan?

Finally, for the Tibetan case, she identifies interesting variations that are consistent with cost-balancing theory’s predictions. The book notes that China chose coercion against Europeans (France and Germany’s leaders met with the Dalai Lama in 2007 and 2008 respectively) while not coercing Australia (its leader met with the Dalai Lama in 2008). Zhang contends that the need to show resolve was stronger in the European examples as an important signal was required to prevent others from following France and Germany’s lead which held considerable influence in Europe (p. 182). By contrast, the number of countries in the Pacific that could follow Australia’s lead was smaller and less consequential. What is more, securing China’s energy needs, in particular liquefied natural gas from Australia, meant that the geoeconomic costs were high if coercion were to take place (p. 183).

The book suggests that picking the “Goldilocks choice” is China’s gambit—where it needs to establish resolve while not inciting geopolitical backlash. That is also why non-militarized coercion is generally preferred (p. 194). Zhang rightly notes that China fears its credibility would weaken if it does not use coercion to communicate resolve (p. 21), while adding that the eventual effectiveness (with regard to changing future behaviors) is, at best, mixed (p. 191). The fact that Chinese coercion decisions differ across time within the same country and also across different countries is an important point, because China under Xi has come to be popularly associated as a singularly assertive and coercive actor in international politics. In contrast, similar to what I have argued elsewhere (Dylan M.H. Loh, *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy*, 2024), this book dispels the notion of a China that is undeviatingly assertive, coherent, and monolithic. I now turn to consider some questions that emerged from my reflection, in the hope of deepening and expanding the discussion catalyzed by *China’s Gambit*.

First, I wonder if the characterization of China’s coercion decisions (indeed any decision-making process in China) as completely rational and calculating (p. 189), as incomplete. Indeed, Zhang notes that the decision to coerce comes from the center (p. 125). To be sure, all of the factors mentioned—geopolitical and economic costs, the requirement to establish credibility—surely matters. But the decision-making ecosystem in China is opaque, and considerations—such as turf wars, narrow institutional goals, and information distortion—matters too, as Zhao Suisheng points out (“China’s Foreign Policy Making Process: Players and Institutions,” in David Shambaugh ed., *China and the World*, 2020).

On the effects of nationalism on coercion decisions, Zhang notes that nationalism is “an ideational source of behavior that tends to be stable over time” (p. 101). Yet as others have shown, nationalism is not constant nor necessarily consistent. Indeed, Chinese political leaders sometimes face pressure that can complicate coercion decisions when, for example, nationalist forces exceed the government’s own positions (see Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations*, 2014). What is more, nationalistic forces can also cause problems when non-coercive or less-than-coercive actions are judged to be inadequate. Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan as part of a visit to Asia as Speaker of the House, and the underwhelming response to her visit by China is one such example. While military coercion was used in this case, this coercion was seen as lacking by a significant number of Chinese people and well-known nationalists were widely attacked in the aftermath. Additionally, I wondered about the impact of reputational consequences owing to its strident foreign policy actions (see Dylan M.H. Loh and Beverley Loke, “COVID-19 and the International Politics of Blame: Assessing China’s Crisis (Mis)Management Practices,” *China Quarterly*, 257, 2024). Are the consequences of reputational impact significant enough to warrant status as a separate variable or can they be folded under geopolitical costs?

Lastly, I did think there is room for a more detailed exploration of “grey-zone” practices. The delineation between military coercion and gray-zone tactics seems almost too “neat”. For example, how do foreign influence and interference—increasingly a tool of Chinese statecraft (Anne-Marie Brady, “Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): China’s Foreign Propaganda Machine,” *Journal of Democracy*, 26(4), 2015)—figure in their coercive calculation? The results of these foreign influence practices are less immediate, yet they hold the potential to compel and coerce other countries’ foreign policy choices.

*China’s Gambit* is a welcome addition to the coercion literature in IR and the literature on China’s foreign policy. The book expands our comprehension of coercive behaviors and their implications by Beijing and

reveals the key factors that feed into extracting compliance from others. With its tightly scoped arguments, robust methodology, and clear relevance, Zhang's book contributes to our understanding of state coercion, foreign policy decision making, and China's international politics.

**Response to Dylan M.H. Loh's Review of *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion***

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— Ketian Zhang 

I appreciate the opportunity to engage with Dylan M.H. Loh's fascinating book, especially because our two books share common ground. As Loh rightly points out, our two books dispel the notion of a China that is "undeviatingly assertive, coherent and monolithic." I also very much appreciate Loh's thorough and constructive review of my book, *China's Gambit*. Below, I offer some reactions to Loh's review.

First, Loh raises an important point about whether the characterization of China's coercion decisions as rational and calculating may be incomplete. I share with Loh's view that despite China being a centralized authoritarian country, bureaucracies and local officials still have their leeway. As Loh's book convincingly demonstrates, China's Foreign Ministry is a critical actor in the implementation of Chinese foreign policy. I don't think Loh and I are in disagreement, but do think that we are examining two facets of Chinese foreign policy: the decision-making of key national security issues, in my case, versus the implementation of these key issues, in Loh's case. In the former, key national security decision-making is, by and large, rational and calculating. However, this does not mean that the implementation stage is completely centralized or rational. Loh aptly demonstrates the domestic polit-

ical considerations of Chinese diplomats when practicing "wolf warrior" diplomacy. Other scholars such as Kacie Miura and Audrye Wong have also shown that local officials and actors could undermine the effectiveness of Chinese economic sanctions (Kacie Miura, "To Punish or Protect? Local Leaders and Economic Coercion in China," *International Security*, 48(2), 2023; Audrye Wong, "More than Peripheral: How Provinces Influence China's Foreign Policy," *China Quarterly*, 235, 2018). Those sanctions decisions, nevertheless, come from the central government. Of course, there are exceptions, as I have shown in the chapter on territorial disputes in the East China Sea, but the local actors that have "gone rogue" were heavily punished.

Second, regarding the role of nationalism, my point is that as an identity variable, it is relatively "sticky." While it does change over time in the case of China (for example, from anti-U.S. nationalism in the Cold War to anti-Japan nationalism in the post-Cold War era), it does not change drastically over just a year or two. Hence, nationalism cannot completely explain the variation regarding coercion decisions and tools over a short period, nor can it explain variation cross-nationally, as seen in the Malaysia versus Philippines case.

Third, on how to categorize gray-zone tactics, Loh raises an interesting point about whether influence and interference count as coercion. Influence and interference campaigns are fascinating topics in and of themselves, but they are not necessarily coercive attempts. For one, the tools used are not always negative. For example, foreign influence can be achieved through bribery. For another, the goals are not always about compelling a foreign policy change in the target state.

Again, I enjoy engaging with Loh's book and his review of my book. I appreciate the opportunity for our books, one focusing more on China's foreign policy decision-making and one focusing more on implementation, to have a much needed dialogue.