

## Great Expectations: China as a G20 host

Melissa Pilgrim

*School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield*

*International Media Centre – G20 Hangzhou Summit.* Hosting one of the world's most important meetings of politicians and policy makers is no small feat. For each host nation, the G20 summit presents not only an immense logistical challenge, but also confers on its host varying weights of expectation. Hosting the G20 for the first time gave China a chance to prove itself in a multitude of ways, on a perfectly choreographed and meticulously-watched world stage. Leading up to the start of the summit there was much talk in the global media about issues that had the potential to impede talks between China and other G20 members, perhaps more so than about any potential agenda topics. So how did China approach its role as host, and did it rise to the challenges offered by the G20, or did it crumble under the weight of international expectation?

### **Strategic dream or logistical nightmare?**

In terms of the pure logistical challenge of hosting a summit on such a large scale, there is little in the way of criticism that could be said; and that which does exist is so trivial that it can simply be swept under Hangzhou airport's infamous [red carpet](#). As with the 2008 Olympic Games, or previous G20 meetings held in other Chinese cities leading up to the main summit, China flexed its logistical muscles. All bus routes, security checks and badge collections were organised and executed almost to perfection largely thanks to Hangzhou's army of hard-working volunteers. China came under some scrutiny for its 'lockdown'-style treatment of the city's residents before and during the summit, which was no doubt the result of concerns for security. Nevertheless, only limited focus should be given to the more

aesthetic aspects of the summit, as the most important judgement of China's approach to the G20 presidency must be its leadership and how it has reacted to political discussions, global events and criticism during its time as host.

### **The lead up to China's G20 debut as host**

The historic significance of China's presidency began as soon as the country was announced as host. The simple fact that China was chosen over Japan from within the group of Asian G20 nations as the 2016 host not only confirmed China's status as the most significant power in the region but was also a source of national pride due to the [historic rivalry and conflict between the two powers and their contrasting opinions of the G20](#). The G20 presidency also represented an opportunity for China to take some control over how it was viewed as a policy maker by the world's media. Instead of constantly being on the receiving end of criticism from summit outcomes, where subjects such as human rights and territorial disputes are often discussed, China was able to control the agenda on its own terms and steer talks

away from taboo topics, thus allowing China to be the master of its own destiny in a way.

China assumed its host position at a time of great uncertainty in global politics and economics. A perfect storm of events, such as Brexit, rising protectionism, terrorism and pre-US election uncertainty, all threaten to throw the global economy back into turmoil, reflected in the current "anaemic growth" of world trade as described by China's Vice Commerce Minister, Wang Shouwen, during his speech on 3<sup>rd</sup> September on the first day of B20 meetings. As a result, China had the chance to take the reins and exert its own influence on the momentum of global development and the world economy: the potential for a watershed shift in global policy to policies 'with Chinese characteristics' was huge.

China seems to somewhat stand alone in international organisations, unlike traditional Western powers like the USA and the UK who sit on both the G7 and G20. European powers such as Germany and Italy have two voices in the G20, giving

their respective delegations opportunity to push for their own national agendas while any regional interests are represented by the EU. The regional tension in East Asia has led to China's alienation from other G20 members in the region, and so China was under pressure both internally and externally to not only show initiative in its agenda and policy recommendations, but also to promote its own national interests. If done effectively, both of these things would help China cement its status as a formidable host. Hangzhou also presented President Xi with an opportunity to align China's and the G20's policies to reflect his own personal goals in order to help him further his personal agenda of clamping down on corruption, which would give him credibility because his goals would then align with those of international organisations.

Being a member of the BRICS group, it was only natural that China's handling of a major international event be compared with fellow BRICS member Brazil's performance as an Olympic host nation. For two such prominent developing countries to be hosting global events in the

same year was cause for attention. Brazil's somewhat difficult time as Olympic host was a complete contrast with China's sleek G20 preparations. This contrast in performance gave China the chance to distinguish itself from its fellow developing country, and it was also a chance to show that China was capable of hosting this type of event just as well as any other fully 'developed' nation.

All of the aforementioned points were sources of both pressure and prestige for China, and the chance to position itself at the centre of international politics came with understandable amounts of international expectations, which President Xi acknowledged during his speech at the G20 Summit welcome dinner. To see whether or not China's consistent brand of 'greater good' governance would translate from its domestic policies to its international policy recommendations, was an exciting prospect.

### **China's initial summit leadership**

As the agenda items were announced during the start of the summit, it seemed that China had indeed chosen to pursue agenda items that would indirectly help the national agenda. The key issues of preventing protectionism, encouraging development and clamping down on corruption would all help domestic policy in a roundabout way.

One of the key themes of Hangzhou was that the global economy is 'interconnected' and should be increasingly interlinked. As part of this, Xi issued a [warning](#) against protectionism at the start of the summit in order to help keep the world economy open and more resistant to turmoil. This desired economic openness would no doubt help China's economy to halt its recent slowdown and extend its influence in other economies around the world. China's move to involve developing economies (particularly those in Africa) in the G20 summit presented that a shift in importance was occurring, at least in China's eyes, from global governance dominated by the Western status quo to new ways of thinking that involved developing countries which are, according

to He Yafei, "mainly represented by China" who can use its own development experience to help guide others.

Ending corruption has been described as "one of the best ways we can promote sustainable development" by Yury Fedotov of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and China has already been implementing anti-corruption policies domestically for several years, to varying degrees of success, but also with [tangible results](#) being seen by the general population. Indeed, as the summit reached its second day, the announcement came from UN staff that the G20 was [calling for ratification](#) of the UN Convention against Corruption, showing this particular summit aim to have been chosen wisely.

### **No more playing catch-up: China takes the initiative**

China is proud of its history, and its leaders have a tendency to use language and references that come from various periods in its rich and varied past. During Xi Jinping's speech on 3<sup>rd</sup> September he talked about how finding a new framework

for development was like “crossing the river by feeling for the stones” (mouzhe shitou guohe). This phrase was first used by [Deng Xiaoping](#) when he was initiating reform in the 1980s. By echoing the iconic words of Deng, it was seemingly an indication of more ground-breaking reform, but this time on a global scale rather than just within China. After examining the final communiqué, it seems that this was indeed foreshadowing of calls for major reform, because there was [mention of a new ‘industrial revolution’](#) involving digital technology, with the Hangzhou Communiqué delivering the G20 New Industrial Revolution Action Plan.

China’s first key demonstration of leadership came when it announced its ratification of the Paris agreement. China often comes under criticism for ‘turning off’ its pollution during international events and for only making superficial efforts to tackle environmental issues, but this action by the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases was hailed as an important [example](#) to other large countries, and shows that China is serious about climate change. The world will have

to wait and see how China implements the agreement however, because the International Energy Agency estimates that in order to meet the Paris Agreement targets there will have to be a cut in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of over 80% by 2050 - not an easy task for a country that produces so many of the world’s goods. Nevertheless, for China to take such a significant step towards tackling climate change indicates that it understands its own role and importance in global affairs.

China was also heavily commended by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon for several reasons related to development (as well as for its summit organisation). During his G20 press conference on September 4<sup>th</sup> he praised China for placing development ‘front and centre for the first time’ at a G20 summit. To invite so many developing, non-G20 nations, especially from Africa, was an example of China’s “far-reaching, compassionate vision”. China’s invitation to so many developing nations shows that China regards them as significant, and shows a forward-thinking attitude, especially as it contrasts with a Euro or American-centric way of thinking. UN

Official Lenni Montiel has said that improving the representation of developing countries at G20 summits will help to strengthen the group's legitimacy. By doing this China has set in motion the potential for a shift in global policy making, and a watershed moment in global politics.

Ban Ki-moon also mentioned China's promotion of global co-operation to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in order to lift more people out of poverty, which is in line with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda's "number one goal" of eradicating poverty in all its forms. It is likely that China will remain committed to this particular goal, given that it has already lifted millions of its own citizens out of poverty in previous decades, and the Secretary General referred to China's efforts as key in having helped to achieve the Millennium Development [goal](#) of halving extreme poverty rates. The Secretary General noted during his press conference that "sustainable development requires sustainable peace", an interesting statement when placed in the context of China, given its historical disputes in the

South China Sea. It seemed that China was very good at implementing global policy when it coincided with its own national agenda.

### **Summit outcomes and China's performance**

As the summit outcomes became known, the world's media waited to see whether an historic 'changing of the guard' had occurred at the top of international policymaking. Ban Ki-moon was extremely complimentary about China's actions, and its involvement of nations from across the development spectrum served to place China at the forefront of a [shift in global thinking](#). This shows how China's role in policymaking has begun to shift from 'scary' communist economic power whose rise threatens the West, to that of a partner whose experiences can and must help set a new framework for global economic policy and development - if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of 2008. Rather than threatening the West, in today's interconnected world, China can use its unprecedented development experience to bolster the global economy

and protect it from future risks. The intense focus included in the G20 agenda on development, and a move away from the old way of dealing with problems shows that China wants to narrow the gap between East and West, between 'developed' and 'developing' countries and shows itself to be aspirational in some of its outcomes; wanting to be seen as on par with the West. Along with gaining tremendous amounts of 'face' by hosting the G20 summit, China, much like its beliefs about the South China Sea, sees its G20 presidency as [assuming its rightful place](#) at the centre of global affairs and significance. China has long been the regional dominant power, now was a chance to begin its ascent to the position of the global dominant power.

At the start of the summit it seemed that China was following President Xi's rhetoric of "actions speak louder than words". China was making bold statements and promising to honour its commitments with actions. Following China's commitment to reduce inequality and promote sustainable development, the Hangzhou Communiqué contained an announcement of China's

[contribution to the establishment](#) of an Entrepreneurship Research Centre on G20 Economies to drive job creation. China also gave more impetus to its reputation as a nation against corruption, with the announcement of a Chinese initiative to [set up a Research Centre](#) on International Cooperation Regarding Persons Sought for Corruption and Asset Recovery in G20 Member States. Setting up this centre in China demonstrates China taking the lead on key global issues and shows China as willing to lead from the front.

The G20 serves as a platform for political discussion but has no secretariat, and therefore there is no legal obligation to fulfil the agenda items agreed upon at the Hangzhou summit. There is no doubt that China has the economic capacity to follow through with its commitments outlined in the communiqué, but only history will tell whether China will follow through, especially if in future its promises end up conflicting with areas of domestic interest. A pertinent example of this is the South China Sea: despite China signing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), [it refuses to be bound by the](#)

[ruling of a UNCLOS tribunal](#) against China's claims in the region.

The topic of the South China Sea China highlights China's blatant refusal to address all aspects of international concern in Hangzhou. By not allowing open discussion about the dispute shows China's inflexibility on issues of national pride and security, perhaps even paranoia. China didn't want to risk embarrassment after having been chosen as host, despite many other G20 members wanting to at least begin an open dialogue about the conflict. Obama did manage to bring up the dreaded 'sea word' in "[candid](#)" talks with Xi, but that was the only time it was brought up during the summit. Xi's opening speech at the summit included the statement "no country is an island" however it seems to be more a case of "no island belongs to another country" when it comes to the South China Sea.

Much emphasis was placed on economic openness during the summit, but this 'openness' failed to translate to the media centre, with virtually no information about press conferences being released to the

general media. This 'drip feeding' of information from summit talks by G20 organisers was telling; it gave the impression that China was controlling who had access to leaders' announcements and therefore that it was trying to control the way in which events were portrayed, adding fuel to the fire of suspicion surrounding China's treatment of the foreign media. On top of this, President Xi was over an hour late for his press conference, indicating that leaders were struggling to agree on the final communiqué and leading to yet more resentment from the foreign press.

China was eager to showcase modernity and vision at Hangzhou. The final leaders' communiqué shows that China did rise to the challenge of showing leadership through its outwardly-facing policies and actions. China's ratification of the Paris Agreement, along with its involvement of many developing nations in the summit talks in order to shape economic policy was indeed ground-breaking and showed that China was capable of taking the initiative. However, a certain level of paranoia and reliance on its domestic style of

governance has betrayed China's efforts to present itself as a nation capable of hosting a G20 summit completely on par with established Western powers. Its refusal to acknowledge its territorial disputes led to heightened tensions, and coloured the lens through which some of the summit talks were viewed. It was clear from the summit preparations, both logistical and intellectual, that the G20 presidency was extremely important to China. If China follows through on the policies agreed on at Hangzhou, especially if they happen to conflict in any way with domestic concerns, then China will have proved itself as a world superpower with the legitimacy to host future summits of this magnitude. For

now at least, we are left with the immediate aftermath of Hangzhou to decide on China's performance and it seems that, considering the lack of previous experience, China more or less rose to the challenge of being a G20 summit host, but actions will speak louder than words.

*Melissa Pilgrim is a Researcher in the School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom.*