



VISUALIZING CHINA'S AMBASSADORS

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Introduction

Ambassador Burns has perhaps been the most vocal proponent of America's capacity for diplomacy and has continually called for "American leadership through diplomacy." In a recent article for Harvard Magazine, he discussed how diplomacy has never been more important as the U.S. confronts the two most serious crises since the Second World War: the global pandemic and economic collapse.¹ In the short time since the publication of that article just two months ago, a third crisis has emerged and that is in U.S.-China relations.

As relations between the U.S. and China plunge to seemingly new lows every day—as most noticeably highlighted by the tit-for-tat consular closures in Houston and Chengdu—competition is intensifying across all domains of the bilateral relationship. Rising tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, covid-19, Huawei, sanctions and bans on everything from high-level officials to social media apps to reporters have all been points of contention. So, thus, we find ourselves in a dangerous, downward spiral, where both countries are increasingly taking actions to punish the other in the name of reciprocity, driving decoupling, breaking down much-needed dialogue, and potentially causing irretrievable damage to the bilateral relationship for decades to come.

It's also paramount to recognize that many of the same fights the U.S. and China are engaged in, are also happening in parallel in capitals all around the world. A recent internal report by government-affiliated Chinese think tank CICIR warned Chinese leadership that global anti-Chinese sentiment is at its highest since 1989.²

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's meeting with top Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi in mid-June was a symbolic measure to rectify things, but was hardly a genuine effort to put a floor on rapid deterioration. Instead, Chinese and American diplomats all around the world, no matter their rank, need to be appropriately informed about the other to have effective dialogues and negotiations to repair the bilateral relationship where possible and when possible. This project is a beta attempt to build a resource for the U.S. side to better understand their Chinese counterparts (Chinese ambassadors)—who they are, their career histories, and their diplomatic networks.

There are four distinct interactive components. Site 1 is the main site. Site 2 allows viewers to see the entire diplomatic network in full view. Sites 3 and 4 can be accessed from within Site 1, or directly.

¹ Nicholas Burns, "The Indispensable Power," Harvard Magazine, June 8, 2020, <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2020/07/features-forum-indispensable-power>.

² "Exclusive: Internal Chinese Report Warns Beijing Faces Tiananmen-like Global Backlash over Virus," *Reuters*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-sentiment-ex-idUSKBN22G19C>.

1. Main site: johnandrewferguson.com/ambassadors

Chinese Ambassadors

This map explores Chinese Ambassadors around the world, their work history and all ambassadors that have served a specific country.

| Country | Ambassador | Year |
|------------------------|---------------|------|
| Afghanistan | WANG Yu | 19 |
| Albania | ZHOU Ding | 14 |
| Algeria | LI Lianhe | 30 |
| Angola | GONG Tao | 16 |
| Antigua and Barbuda | SUN Ang | 20 |
| Argentina | ZOU Xiaoli | 7 |
| Armenia | TIAN Erlong | 17 |
| Australia | CHENG Jingye | 21 |
| Austria | LI Xiaosi | 5 |
| Azerbaijan | GUO Min | 22 |
| Bahrain | AN Waer | 23 |
| Bangladesh | LI Jiming | 8 |
| Barbados | YAN Xiusheng | 15 |
| Belarus | CUI Qiming | 16 |
| Belgium | CAO Zhongming | 15 |
| Benin | PENG Jingtao | 21 |
| Bolivia | HUANG Ya | 27 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | JI Ping | 6 |
| Botswana | ZHAO Yanbo | 30 |
| Brazil | YANG Wanming | 17 |
| Brunel | YU Hong | 17 |
| Bulgaria | DONG Xiaojun | 25 |
| Burkina Faso | LI Jian | 11 |
| Burundi | LI Changlin | 23 |
| Cambodia | WANG Wentian | 30 |
| Cameroon | WANG Yingwu | 25 |
| Canada | GONG Ruiwu | 18 |

Ambassador to Turkmenistan
SUN Weidong (2) 孙炜东

Work History

- 2016-: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan
驻土库曼斯坦大使馆特命全权大使
Ambassador to the Chinese Embassy in Turkmenistan
- 2014-2016: Beijing, China
外交部欧亚司参赞
Counsel of the Eurasian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 2011-2014: Astana, Kazakhstan
驻哈萨克斯坦共和国大使馆参赞、公使衔参赞
Counsel and Minister Counsel of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan
- 2009-2011: Beijing, China
中国石油天然气勘探开发公司副总经理
Deputy General Manager of China National Petroleum Exploration and Development Corporation
- 2003-2009: Baku, Azerbaijan
驻阿塞拜疆共和国大使馆参赞
Counsel of the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan
- 2001-2003: Beijing, China
外交部欧亚司一秘、处长
First Secretary and Director of the Eurasian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 1999-2001: Beijing, China
外交部办公厅二秘、一秘
Second Secretary and First Secretary of

2. 3D social network of overseas postings without filtering:

johnandrewferguson.com/ambassadors/foreign_overlap_network.html

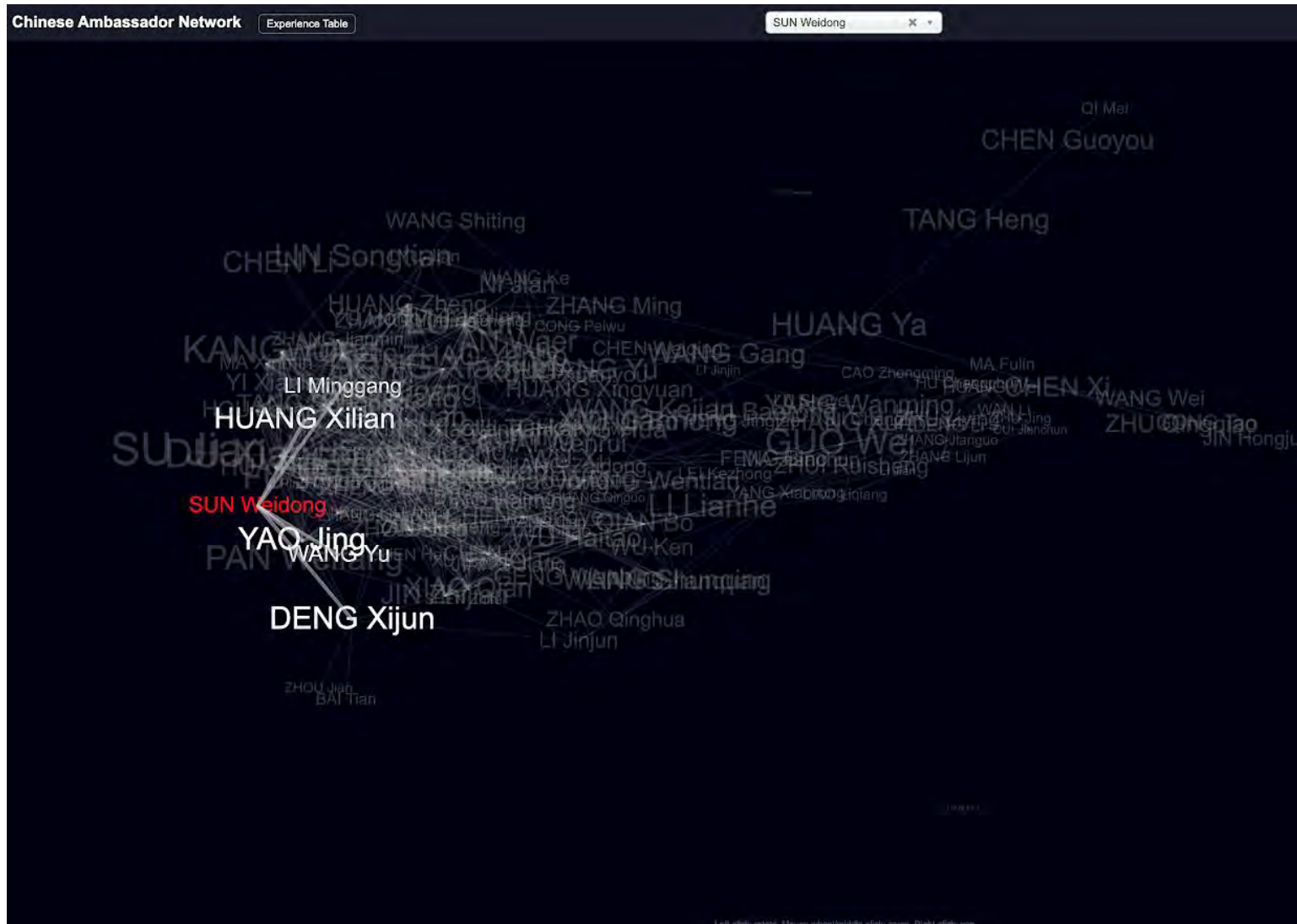
This was the first iteration of the 3D social network, which displays all diplomatic overlaps in overseas postings. This network is included for display clarity of the entire structure, where *all* members of the network can be viewed.



3. 3D social network of overseas postings with filtering:

johnandrewferguson.com/ambassadors/ambassador_network.html

This subsequent iteration of the 3D social network lets users filter and search for different ambassadors, then highlights that ambassador together with only his/her personal connections visible. Other ambassadors with no common shared work history are grayed out.



4. Overseas postings tabular search:

johnandrewferguson.com/ambassadors/ambassadors_table_overlaps.asp

While the 3D social network can provide helpful visuals to contextualize the larger themes and patterns among all of China's ambassadors, this tabular format is more useful in allowing users to locate specific details and find the exact common overlap among the 2,495 overlap periods that exist.

| Chinese Ambassador Overlaps | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|--|---------------|
| 3D Network | | 92 overlap years (2,495 total) Filter Table: <input type="text" value="liu xiaoming"/> | |
| Year * | Name 1 | Name 2 | Country |
| 1982 | CUI Tiankai | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1983 | CUI Tiankai | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1989 | CHEN Xu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1989 | LI Jiming | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1989 | LI Junhua | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1989 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Yinghong | United States |
| 1990 | CHEN Xu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | CHEN Xu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | CHENG Jingye | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | CHENG Jingye | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | LI Jiming | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | LI Jiming | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | LI Junhua | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | LI Junhua | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1990 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Jun | United States |
| 1990 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Jun | United States |
| 1990 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Yinghong | United States |
| 1990 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Yinghong | United States |
| 1991 | CHEN Xu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1991 | CHENG Jingye | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1991 | LI Jiming | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1991 | LI Junhua | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1991 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Jun | United States |
| 1992 | CHEN Xu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1992 | CHENG Jingye | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1992 | JIANG Yu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1992 | LI Junhua | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1992 | LIU Xiaoming | YANG Zigang | United States |
| 1992 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Jun | United States |
| 1993 | CHENG Jingye | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1993 | JIANG Yu | LIU Xiaoming | United States |
| 1993 | LIU Xiaoming | YANG Zigang | United States |
| 1993 | LIU Xiaoming | ZHANG Jun | United States |
| 1998 | CHAO Xiaoliang | LIU Xiaoming | United States |

The tools and interactive visualizations designed may be helpful in answering a number of questions (from basic to most complex) including:

- What is a specific ambassador's work history (domestically in China and overseas)?
- What active ambassadors have served in a specific country?
- What active ambassadors have overlapped in their overseas service by at least one year?
- What patterns can be observed in the overlap of overseas service?
- Who are the more seasoned/experienced ambassadors? Who are the less experienced Chinese ambassadors?
- Who are the potential rising stars among China's ambassadors who will command significant diplomatic postings in the future? Is anyone being cultivated for higher leadership?

Use Cases

1. One example use case is the ability to quickly receive an update on Chinese diplomatic activity in a specific region by scrolling through the most recent tweets of the ambassadors in a given region without leaving the system. This allows users to still relate all the cartographic information and maximize the visual effects of the map. For example, if one's area of focus was the Middle East, someone could quickly click through each country in the region and get the latest updates from each ambassador / embassy Twitter feed without having to navigate and find each page separately.
2. Another use case is the ability to learn more about the personal diplomatic networks of any one ambassador in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). For example, if an American diplomat was working with the Chinese ambassador to India, Sun Weidong, on a trilateral issue, by viewing his personal relationships and overseas career overlap history, you'd learn that Ambassador Sun had spent a great deal of time working in the South Asia region together with Yao Jing and Wang Yu, the current ambassadors to Pakistan and Afghanistan respectively. On the whole, the core of diplomacy is about relationships.
3. Another use case is to orient new diplomats at the State Department or diplomats of any rank with less China experience as to who the big players are. Without needing to do hours of research, American diplomats unfamiliar with the Chinese MFA could quickly get a broad overview as well as dive into more minute details. The tool is not meant to replace the already robust training that American diplomats receive, but rather to supplement it where insufficient.

Contextual Background

China's foreign ministry follows the widely applied diplomatic rank model like most of the world, but China has several unique elements unlike anywhere else in the world: the MFA is a fusion of party and state—like the rest of China's government. This dual nature makes it necessary to understand China's foreign policy-making within the context of its unique political system. Much like other countries, dealing with China's foreign policy requires interacting with a number of actors who all have different interests and exert their own influence on the decision-making process. But unlike other states, under China's highly centralized leadership, Chinese diplomats are evaluated not on how well they perform their professional duties, but strictly on how faithfully and vocally they toe the party line. Consequently, a

plethora of actors compete viciously for the favour and attention of higher-ranking bodies. Analysts have described the wide array of interests as a “fractious, highly competitive group of institutions with sometimes overlapping jurisdiction.”³ Another downside of this promotion system is that “an objective assessment of the consequences of any given foreign policy decision may not always be the highest priority for the many actors competing for Xi’s limited attention”—an example being the failure of analysts to accurately predict the results of the local elections in Taiwan.⁴

Other actors which are able to exert substantial influence on foreign policy include senior Communist Party of China (CCP) officials who hold no government position, the CEOs of large state-owned resource companies, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and provincial leaders who outrank all senior Chinese government foreign affairs officials. As Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel note in their report, “all foreign policy actors claim to operate in the name of China’s national interests—and thus almost all actions can be justified.”⁵

The military is relatively autonomous from the foreign policy apparatus. An example is the 2007 ASAT test, which was conducted without a coordinated Chinese position being agreed upon in advance. The MFA was not able to provide any comment until more than one week later. In other situations, there is greater coordination with the military—maritime security actors involved in the South China Sea are thought to have greater freedom than those involved in the East China Sea because senior leaders are more attentive to relations with Japan than to smaller Southeast Asian nations.

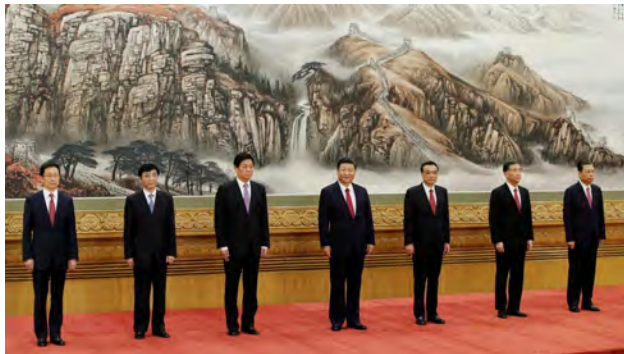
This gets to the question of how the most consequential foreign policy decisions are made and who is responsible for them. Worth mentioning here are the roles of Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, the two most powerful members of China’s foreign ministry. While Wang Yi is commonly referred to as the Foreign Minister of China and often represents China in the most high-profile foreign visits, Yang is technically higher in rank as he was elevated to the 25-person Politburo in 2017—a significant move that makes Yang more senior than even the vice chairpersons of the Central Military Commission and the NPC Standing Committee. Yang was Wang’s predecessor in the Foreign Minister role from 2007 to 2013, and is widely considered the foremost U.S. expert with his career shadowing some of the most important developments in modern U.S.-China relations. It’s been clear that it has been Beijing’s intention from early on to nurture Yang into the point-person for dealing with the U.S. having been posted to Washington three times leading to the development of close personal friendships with the Bush family. It is interesting then, that Beijing chose to dispatch Yang Jiechi instead of Wang Yi for seven hours of rare talks in Honolulu with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Yang Jiechi commands far greater U.S. experience than Wang Yi, yet Yang lacks the same tough, combative militancy that Wang Yi (and Mike Pompeo) regularly display on the world stage. Secretary Pompeo no doubt deals with two very distinct personalities in diplomacy with China’s top ranks.

³ Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel, “How Are Foreign Policy Decisions Made in China?,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 101–10, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.121>.

⁴ Jakobson and Manuel.

⁵ Jakobson and Manuel.

Unlike the U.S. Secretary of State, which maintains relatively absolute authority over America’s foreign affairs and a visible presence on the President’s cabinet, Beijing designates “point men” most often through the 7-member Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) overseeing China’s most “consequential foreign relationships”—the U.S., Japan, Russia, and the DPRK.⁶ It’s unclear whether China considers Europe / the EU as a “major relationship.” Within the PSC, Premier Li Keqiang covers Europe / the EU and Li Zhanshu is most prominently seen as Xi Jinping’s personal envoy to Vladimir Putin (Russia) and Kim Jong Un (DPRK).



Current Politburo Standing Committee



Li Keqiang in Europe



Li Zhanshu with Kim Jong Un



Li Zhanshu with Vladimir Putin

The U.S. portfolio is mostly handled by Vice Premier Liu He as the principal trade negotiator. Vice President Wang Qishan (recently stepped down from the PSC) is also thought to be tasked with U.S.-China relations given his experience on financial / economic issues and a vast network of personal relationships with high-level U.S. officials. Recently though, Wang Qishan has vanished from the public eye with not a single appearance outside the May NPC meeting, a brief appearance in Beijing on May 24, and early April’s mourning for martyrs who died fighting covid-19.⁷ It’s unclear whether Wang has been working behind the scenes on U.S.-China relations as there has been no reporting on Wang’s activities for

⁶ Jakobson and Manuel.

⁷ “China Vitae : VIP Appearances and Travel,” accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.chinavitae.com/vip/index.php?mode=events&type=cv&id=426>.

the better part of the last six months. Wang was also given the task of “calming down Hong Kong,” but his role for now seems to be primarily in the shadows.



Vice Premier Liu He



Wang Qishan

It is unclear who handles high-level strategic decisions regarding Japan while India does not seem to be a “top priority foreign relationship of consequence” that demands a PSC member’s personal attention. Africa, South America, the Middle East also seem to be of less consequence and are likely handled primarily at the Vice Minister level, absent a major crisis or development. The strategic pact with Iran that has recently been brought to light may qualify as a “strategic” development outside of major-power relationships that involved input and deliberation at higher levels.^{8 9}

Still on top of the ambassadors, there is yet another group of 9 Vice Foreign Ministers and Assistant Foreign Ministers who oversee functional and geographic regions.¹⁰ Qi Yu, Party Secretary of the MFA and the top-ranking member of this group, was a notable appointment considering the post is typically held by an experienced diplomat.¹¹ Analysts have speculated that the appointment is a way for Xi to bolster political loyalty among the foreign service. It is among these officials that typically high-profile diplomatic posts are assigned. For example, Ma Zhaoxu, who now oversees international organizations and conferences, international economic affairs, arms control, and foreign affairs management was floated as a potential contender for China’s ambassador to the UN (another contender being Liu Xiaoming, current ambassador to the U.K.). Zheng Zeguang, current head of policy planning, North America, Oceania, Latin America, and translation / interpretation is rumored to be under consideration to replace

⁸ “China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership, Defying U.S. - The New York Times,” accessed August 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html>.

⁹ “Opinion | When China Met Iran - The New York Times,” accessed August 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/opinion/china-iran.html>.

¹⁰ “Principal Officials,” accessed August 14, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zygy_663314/.

¹¹ Charlotte Gao, “What Does Qi Yu’s Surprising Appointment Mean for China’s Foreign Ministry?,” accessed August 16, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/what-does-qi-yus-surprising-appointment-mean-for-chinas-foreign-ministry/>.

Cui Tiankai upon his (delayed) retirement as ambassador to the U.S.¹² This shows that the reshuffling of posts at this level are not strictly hierarchical—ambassadors can be promoted “up” to become vice ministers managing entire geographic areas / functional areas but there can also be promotion “down”; typically high-profile ambassadorships in Washington, London, Brussels, or Moscow command great respect and attention considering they have greater influence than the vice minister who oversees their geographic area.

Within this body of 9 vice ministers, there is a peculiar matching of functional responsibility with geographic areas that correlates with what issue may be the most pressing within that region and requires the most coordinated expertise. For comparison, this group in the U.S. is analogous to the group of U.S. Under Secretaries of State, but in China, geographic oversight is dispersed alongside functional responsibilities (unlike the U.S. Under Secretary of State who manages geographic regions through Assistant Secretaries).



Vice Foreign Ministers, organized from left-to-right, top-to-bottom by rank

Zheng Zeguang, Vice Minister responsible for policy planning and translation / interpretation is also geographically in charge of North America. It is most likely no coincidence that policy planning, tasked

¹² “Trump Visit Sees China’s US Ambassador Delay Retirement,” South China Morning Post, October 28, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117263/trump-visit-sees-chinas-ambassador-us-delay-retirement>.

with “study and analysis issues of overall strategic importance to the global situation and international relations while coordinating research and analytical work” is within the same portfolio as the vice minister technically responsible for U.S.-China relations. The Policy Planning Department is somewhat analogous to the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. Department of State. It is also most likely no coincidence that translation / interpretation is also tasked with North America given that Chinese diplomats mainly use the U.S. as a training ground for English fluency.

The decision to bring together Asia, treaty and law, and boundary and ocean affairs under Luo Zhaohui is most likely to streamline coordination and planning surrounding China’s ongoing maritime boundary disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

The portfolio of West Asia, North Africa, Africa, and external security affairs under Vice Minister Chen Xiaodong is most likely intentional given that Africa and the Middle East are the locations of China’s first experiences in anti-piracy operations (Gulf of Aden), the location of China’s first overseas military base (Djibouti), and the region for 12 of 14 UN peacekeeping operations, all of which China is heavily involved in.¹³

What seems less clear is the fusion of Europe and information under Vice Minister Qin Gang. Possible theories might point to Europe being the most decisive of battlegrounds for Huawei.

¹³ “Current Peacekeeping Operations,” United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/current-peacekeeping-operations>.

Findings

Regional diplomatic networks

While it is ultimately up to those American diplomats who already regularly work with their Chinese counterparts to explore, some tight-knit diplomatic circles already exist in some regions and are worth highlighting. Some are easier to understand their utility or motive—the current ambassadors in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have all spent time serving together in Pakistan. The incumbent ambassador to Japan, Kong Xuanyou, has spent nearly all of his time together with the current ambassadors to Singapore and Vietnam. Lu Shaye, current ambassador to France has common work histories with the ambassadors across the Francosphere and Canada. Cheng Jingye, ambassador to Australia has extensive overlap with Liu Xiaoming in the U.S. from 1990-1993. These small examples represent just a tiny fraction of overlap connections that can be learned from this data. All in all, diplomacy relies on leveraging personal relationships in dialogues, negotiations, etc. and the [tabular view](#) presents a systematic way of identifying these connections to be used in conjunction with informal accounts.

The U.S. as a hub for diplomatic networking

Of the 2,495 overlapping career connections among incumbent Chinese ambassadors, 56.7% of these connections occurred while serving in the U.S.—by far the most dominant country. An overlapping career connection is defined as two incumbent ambassadors spending at least one year together working in the same country. The next most prominent “hub” for making diplomatic connections is France at 8.1% of all connections made. Russia was next at 7.2% while Switzerland followed at 3.9%. All other countries had negligible percentages. (See Figure 1 below). Note that it was impossible to determine whether two people knew each other / worked together with that person definitively or even if one person departed before the other arrived in that overlapping year. Finally, as is the case in any study of organizational politics, a connection also does *not necessarily* symbolize a friendly relationship—a connection may just as easily represent a competitive relationship. In fact, it is actually more likely to be a competitive relationship as diplomats of the same rank are constantly vying for policy influence and promotion.

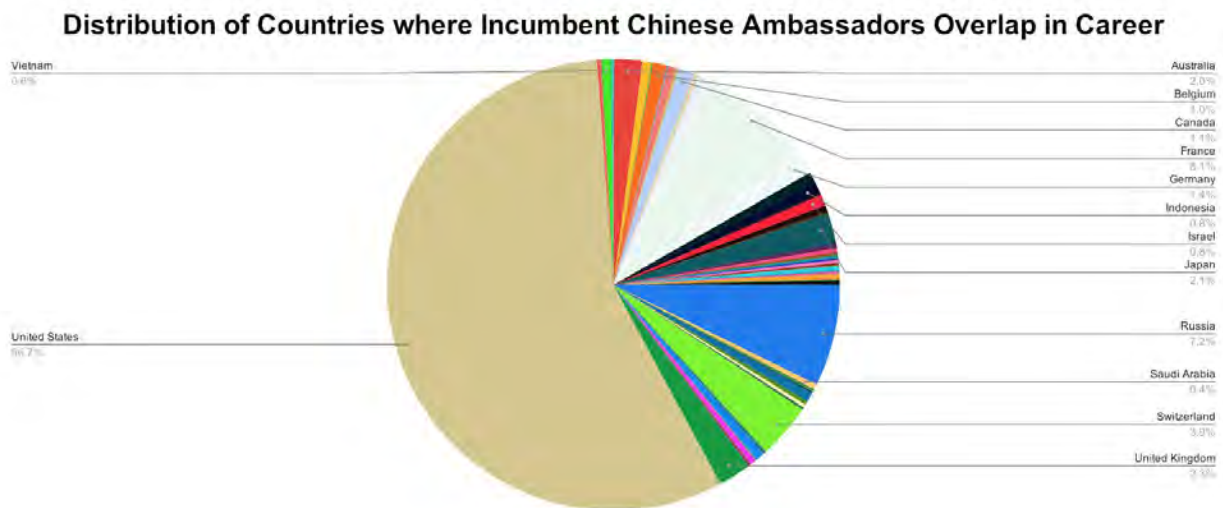


Figure 1

What makes this interesting is that there is no outstanding factor about the U.S. that explains this curious trend. While the U.S. indeed hosts the headquarters of the UN in New York, more staff work at the UN office in Geneva, Switzerland than in New York.

France could be considered a diplomatic hub for Chinese diplomats that rotate through other French-speaking countries, many of which were former French colonies. Examples of ambassadors that have followed this trend have served in the Ivory Coast, Morocco, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and the DRC. The same theory applies to Russia where nearly all ambassadors serving in post-Soviet states and/or Russian-speaking regions will have rotated through Russia at some point. Ambassadors in Guinea-Bissau and Angola have rotated through Portugal. And while at first, these might appear to be linguistic clusters, this pattern does not hold true for the Spanish-speaking world.

Switzerland emerges as the diplomatic hub for Europe due to the large concentration of multilateral organizations in Geneva. Notably, Brussels and Vienna, which are also home to a number of multilateral institutions in Europe do not seem to be major hubs for Chinese diplomats to work together.

When viewed across time, another trend becomes quite striking for this class of incumbent ambassadors. The number of career overlaps in the U.S. took off around 2005, reached its peak around 2008-2009, then sharply declined (see Figure 2). This means that most incumbent ambassadors worked alongside their colleagues in the U.S. around 2008, but then left to take up other diplomatic postings afterward. It is unclear as to why this dramatic shift happened. Russia saw two small increases, the first in the mid-1990s, and the other from in the early 2000s.

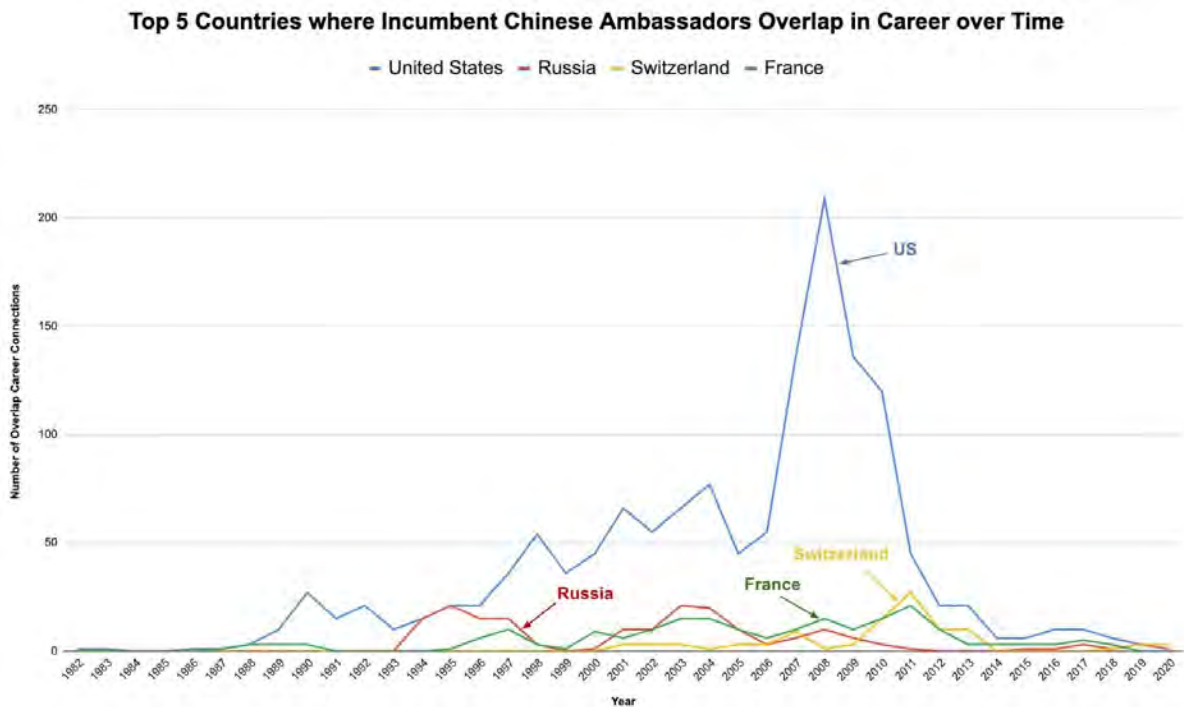


Figure 2

Experience in the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC)

Two ambassadors, Du Xiacong (Cape Verde) and Ma Fulin (Republic of the Congo) both occupied the role of Deputy General Manager of CNOOC, the third-largest national oil company in China that focuses specifically on the exploitation, exploration, and development of energy outside China. Both Ambassador Du and Ambassador Ma have careers that exclusively remained focused on the African Continent. Du Xiacong prior to his appointment in Praia was stationed in Uganda and Somalia. Ma Fulin had prior postings to the Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Rwanda. Both ambassadors had held top posts in Beijing overseeing Africa.

This dynamic might initially suggest the intertwinement of China's foreign policy apparatus with China's state-owned energy companies. But several factors are amiss. It is intriguing as to why not more than just two ambassadors have experience in the state-owned energy sector if energy is so important in Chinese foreign policy, and why the two that do are solely limited to the African continent. One would think that if China saw value in having its ambassadors have intimate knowledge of energy and be more effective in their diplomatic roles, that ambassadors to countries across the Middle East and Arab world would reflect this kind of experience. Moreover, the countries that Ambassador Du and Ambassador Ma served in are *not* major energy exporters whatsoever and account for a negligible amount (if any at all) of China's energy imports.

While one theory might suggest that the African energy market poses a more difficult business climate than the Middle East, this seems unlikely. You would expect an ambassador with CNOOC experience to be posted in Sudan, Algeria, or Angola instead.

Based on this observation about CNOOC, it is likely that as carbon-based fossil fuels inevitably diminish as a favorable fuel source, China may eventually send its diplomats to gain experience in state-owned mining companies in preparation for diplomatic roles in countries where China needs to secure supplies of rare earth minerals—most of which can be found in Africa. These metals are key to China's future high-tech development and are essential in everything from electric vehicle batteries to advanced satellite construction.

Uyghur Diplomats

While China has a small number of ethnic-minority diplomats, the current ambassador corps only hosts a single ambassador of Uyghur descent—An Waer, ambassador to Bahrain. Previously, he also held roles in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Amid ever-increasing international scrutiny over China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China has a potentially valuable diplomat that thus-far has noticeably been extremely quiet on the issue. Ambassador An may be quietly playing a role in the Middle East by assuaging partners and making sure Muslim and Arab countries remain silent on the issue. Given China's desire to control the sensitive global narrative on Xinjiang, it isn't hard to imagine more diplomats of Uyghur descent be promoted through the ranks to lend credibility to and a strong voice to back Beijing's claims.

The Russian "Bubble"

The post-Soviet states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Belarus, Ukraine, and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) are the only countries with

ambassadors to *not* have served in another region of the world. Note that the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and Moldova—all post-Soviet republics—are not a part of this bubble, but rather have ambassadors with experience mainly in Europe. Also not a part of this trend are Eastern bloc / Warsaw Pact member countries like Hungary or Poland. Additionally, all but one ambassador (Tajikistan) to post-Soviet states have all *served* in Russia at one point (not just before the breakup of the Soviet Union but after 1991). This striking difference creates an isolated “bubble” phenomenon whereby this Russia group is separated from the rest of the diplomatic corps (see Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: The Russian “Bubble” circled in red

This structural pattern reveals a great deal about Beijing’s attitude toward Eurasia and Russia—that from a foreign policy perspective, China does *not* view these particular post-Soviet states as inherently independent countries, but rather still predominantly within the orbit of Russia and they are treated as such. By not including the Baltic states or Moldova, this is Beijing’s evidence that in their minds, these countries have already escaped Moscow’s orbit and no longer belong to this “Russian bubble.”

By grouping diplomats within this isolated bubble, China can more effectively coordinate policy with Moscow as diplomats within this region will become intimately familiar with post-Soviet dynamics and to what extent each state is dependent on Russia. Considering that Beijing is geopolitically vying for influence in post-Soviet spaces against Moscow (especially Central Asia), it would make sense that Chinese policymakers want to understand how strong certain dependencies are by coordinating amongst themselves, then capitalize on those at the expense of Moscow. A second explanation might be that China has tacit agreements with Russia to cooperate and fill different roles for various countries—in many cases with Russia being the security guarantor while China being the economic partner. This might be China’s way of reassuring Moscow of friendly intentions while not undermining trust via ambiguous motives.

Interestingly, Mongolia is not a part of this post-Soviet space although the country has historically and to this day—has strong Russian and Soviet influence. This might suggest that Beijing does take the same view or strategy of “partitioning” responsibilities when it comes to Mongolia. China may now view Russian influence as much of a force in Moscow as it does in other post-Soviet spaces.

At first, this bubble raises questions about why Beijing does not apply this framework of diplomatic assignments to other regions of the world. Perhaps the only other region where this might make sense is Oceania—but Chinese diplomats clearly do not spend time in Canberra to learn about the dynamics of the South Pacific before taking up assignments in Wellington, Suva, or Port Vila. Much of diplomacy depends on the regional context and a Chinese diplomat would be far better equipped with the right diplomatic networks and regional knowledge if Chinese foreign policy were organized this way. Even if there wasn't a “hub” country like Russia within a region, it still might make sense for diplomats to be the “point person” when an issue in a region arises. An ambassador would then have the right connections in all the right countries along with vast regional knowledge to find a solution or to engineer a particular favorable outcome.

China's “major relationships” and “training grounds”

China's diplomacy focuses intensely on its “major country relationships,” “neighboring countries” and “developing countries.” Hu Jintao was the first Chinese leader to outline this diplomatic philosophy in 2004 in an address to foreign diplomats in Beijing:

“中国外交的整体布局一直是‘大国是关键、周边是首要、发展中国家是基础、多边是重要舞台’”¹⁴

Translated to English, it means that the “big powers are key, neighboring countries are important, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateralism is the stage.” This philosophy is clearly reflected in the diplomats Beijing assigns to what it views as its most important diplomatic postings.

China's most prominent, experienced, and seasoned diplomats tend to serve in the Anglosphere and in Japan. For example, Liu Xiaoming and Cui Tiankai—the most highly visible Chinese ambassadors in service both have extensive experience in the U.S. and fluency in English, most times coupled with prior experience as an interpreter / translator in their early career. Graduate and postgraduate study at a foreign institution also seems to be a tacit prerequisite for top jobs. Liu Xiaoming attended the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Boston) while Cui Tiankai studied at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (Washington). Top diplomats Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi also both speak fluent English. Wang spent time at Georgetown (Washington) while Yang attended the University Bath and the London School of Economics. Among these four, all have some professional diplomatic experience serving in the U.S. except for Wang Yi. Cui Tiankai and Liu Xiaoming overlapped with one another in the U.S. during their earliest diplomatic postings (1982, 1983, 1998, 1999). Japan also could be considered a training ground for China's highest ranking diplomats—both Cui Tiankai and Wang Yi

¹⁴ “第十次驻外使节会议在京举行 胡锦涛温家宝讲话-搜狐新闻中心,” accessed August 15, 2020, <http://news.sohu.com/20040830/n221793021.shtml>.

previously served as ambassadors in Tokyo (and even had overlapping experience where they presumably learned from one another).

Liu Xiaoming’s experience is perhaps the most interesting of the four. Most of Liu’s experience has actually been in the U.S. but he also had postings as ambassador in North Korea and Egypt with earlier assignments in Zambia. Liu Xiaoming is also one of the few prominent Chinese diplomats with domestic governance experience in Gansu Province. According to our data, about one fifth of all incumbent ambassadors have had leadership roles domestically at some point in their careers. Liu Xiaoming is also one of the most experienced diplomats in terms of raw number of years spent in the MFA. With 35 years of continual service, Liu is only outperformed by two others—Guo Wei in Seychelles and Guo Wei in Palestine—both at 45 years each. Liu Xiaoming might also be one of the most well connected ambassadors, ranking 8th overall with 92 total career overlap connections. Li Junhua, current ambassador in Italy, leads the entire corps with 151 followed by the ambassadors to Antigua & Barbuda, Albania, Ireland, Spain, Poland, and Kiribati respectively (all slightly unusual). (See Figure 4 below for the top 30.) And while Cui Tiankai might only be three years older than Liu Xiaoming, Cui has 15 years less experience. Reportedly Cui’s expected retirement was put on hold due to instability in Washington, D.C. under Trump and was asked to stay longer.¹⁵ While Liu’s ambassadorship in Egypt might be considered an outlier compared with the experiences of Cui Tiankai, Liu Xiaoming, and Yang Jiechi, his appointment in Pyongyang is incredibly unique among China’s most prominent diplomats and thus, it would not be surprising if Liu Xiaoming was, at some point, given more authority and perhaps even promoted to Foreign Minister upon Wang Yi’s retirement. While he seems to possess all the necessary credentials, he just may have lost favorability due to China’s rapidly deteriorating relationship with the U.K. under his watch (Huawei banned, fallout over Hong Kong national security law, denial of Xinjiang footage during live interview, etc.).

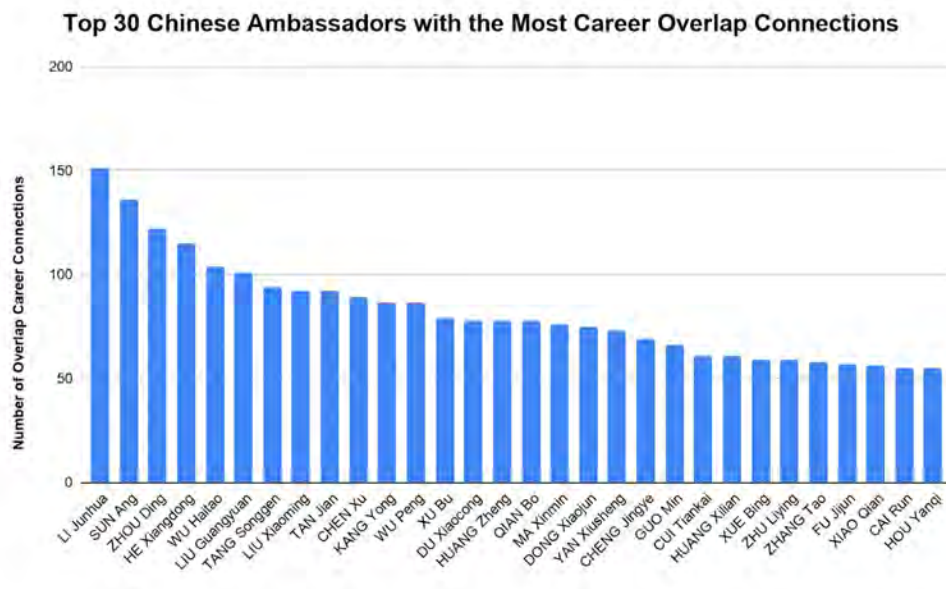


Figure 4

¹⁵ “Trump Visit Sees China’s US Ambassador Delay Retirement.”

Both the U.S. and U.K. are countries where China typically maintains an ambassador for a much longer period than other countries. The average ambassador tenure is under 4 years; Cui Tiankai has been ambassador in Washington since 2013 while Liu Xiaoming has been ambassador in London since 2010.¹⁶ The previous incumbent in Tokyo, Cheng Yonghua, served for nearly a decade from 2010 to 2019. This pattern indicates a preference by Beijing for more long-term stability with countries China sees as its most important diplomatic relationships. The U.S., U.K., and Japan are in direct contrast to the other two critical relationships—Russia and the DPRK which do not follow this trend of having ambassadorships with long tenure. The most likely reason is the difference in governance structure—Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un hold autocratic power in undemocratic systems. Moscow and Pyongyang’s relationship with Beijing is handled more through personal relationships and close envoys (Li Zhanshu) rather than through ambassadors. China’s relations with Anglosphere, Europe, and Japan are best managed through structural cultivation given how frequently leadership turnovers happen.

When it comes to the *number* of different countries Chinese diplomats have served in, the vast majority have served in 1, 2, or 3 countries total, accounting for 82.8% of the total (see Figure 5).

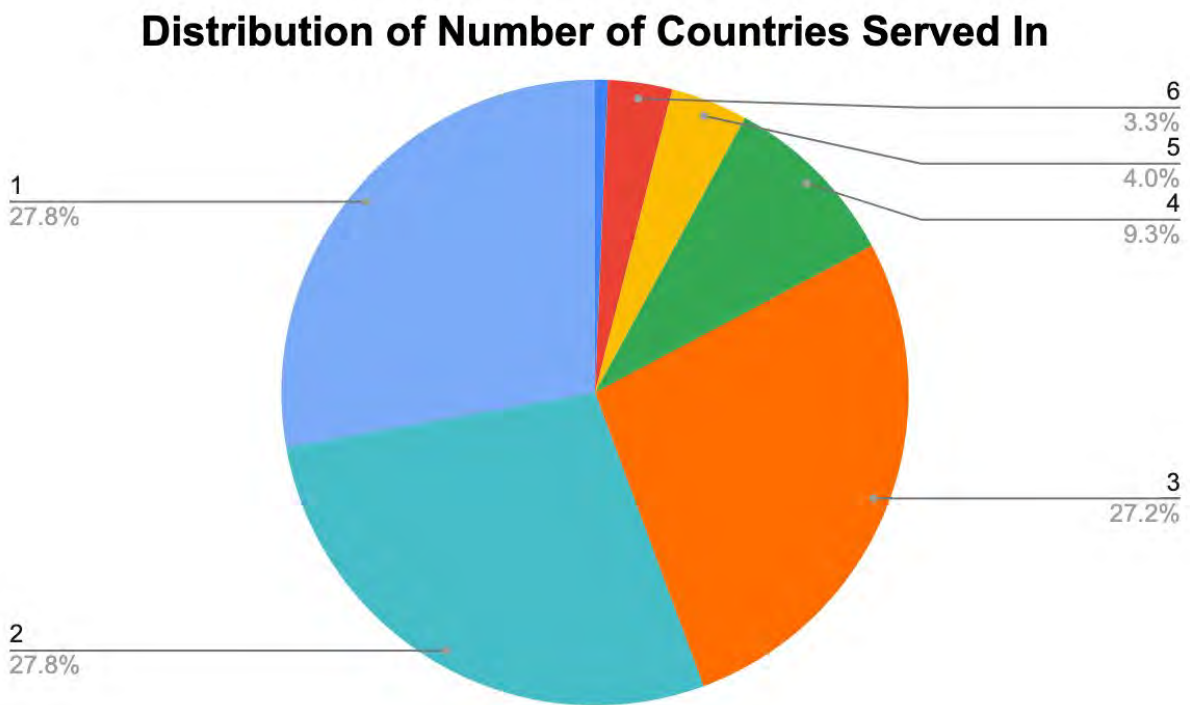


Figure 5

Only 14 ambassadors have served in 4 countries, 6 have served in 5 countries, 5 have served in 6, and just one ambassador has served in 7 total countries. This diplomat that served in 7 countries is Deng Xijun, current ambassador to ASEAN (see Figure 6). Ambassador Deng’s most recent appointment was in Afghanistan, which is an example of a country where China “tests” Chinese ambassadors of their

¹⁶ “Trump Visit Sees China’s US Ambassador Delay Retirement.”

“diplomatic skill”—sort of like a training ground before being moved up to higher, more challenging posts. It has been customary for the MFA to rotate the Chinese ambassador in Afghanistan every 2 years according to Chinese state media, significantly shorter than the average tenure of just below 4 years.¹⁷

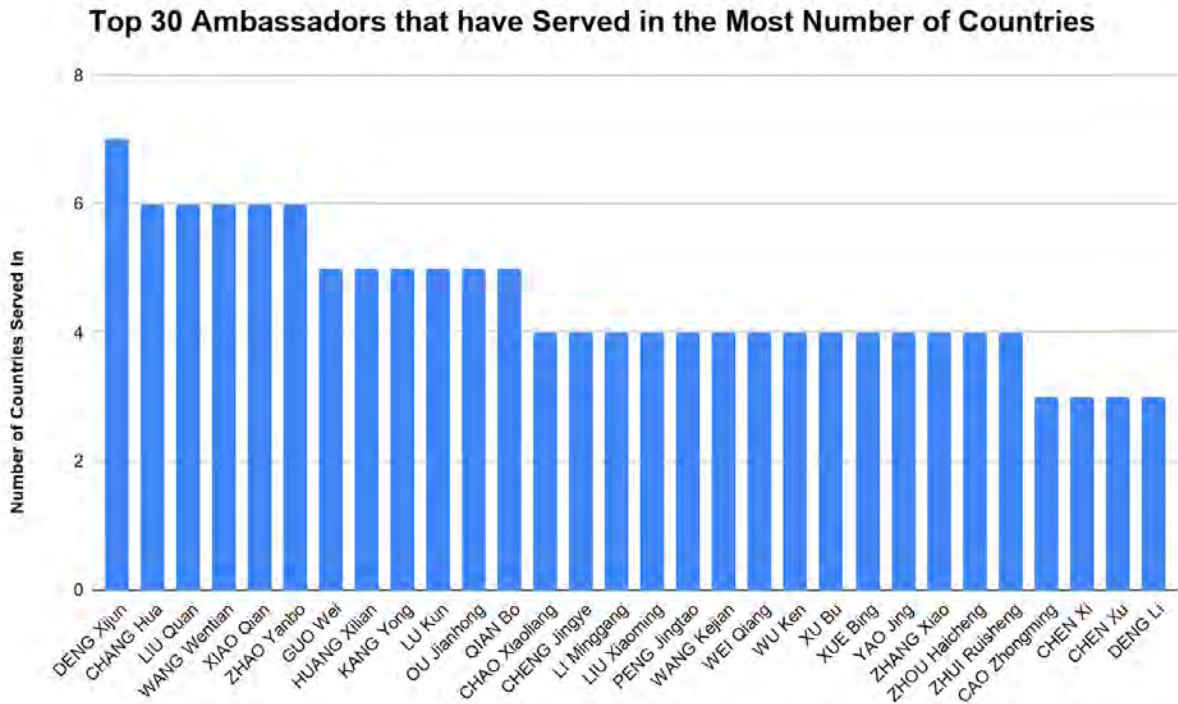


Figure 6

Technical Details

It is our hope that this project could be helpful to the U.S. State Department’s foreign service to better research, understand, and negotiate with their Chinese counterparts using data visualization. Below are some technical details of this beta version. The code base can be transferred to technical personnel for changes and updates (through GitHub or other means). Considering the visualization pulls from a static database that was compiled in late July, the tool requires fairly regular updates and maintenance if it is to be regularly used as a tool. Even after the completion of data collection, 4 new ambassador appointments / changes were made on July 31: new ambassadors to Eritrea, Liberia, and two new deputy ambassadors to the UN.¹⁸

From a technical perspective, the 3D globe and 2D map are in SVG (scalable vector graphics) format. jQuery was the foundational Javascript framework with additional plugins used like DataTables (tabular view), Chosen (search / sort dropdown lists), and Magnific popup & JackBox popup (popup windows).

¹⁷ “邓锡军将卸任中国驻阿富汗大使 两年一换成惯例-搜狐新闻,” accessed August 15, 2020, <http://news.sohu.com/20150924/n421988646.shtml>.

¹⁸ “President Xi Jinping Appoints New Ambassadors,” accessed August 15, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/dsrm_665397/t1803738.shtml.

The 3D network or force-directed graph was adapted from the work of Vasco Asturiano, a UX/data visualization engineer in San Francisco.¹⁹ The live Twitter feeds were embedded using Twitter’s own “publish” feature.²⁰ The data is stored in different ways: JSON format for the 3D network, a Microsoft database for work history, and Javascript arrays for rapid page loading. Data was sourced from exclusively public open source information in both English and Chinese; this includes the website of every overseas Chinese embassy. Every effort has been made to retain the integrity of information that was sourced in Chinese and subsequently translated into English. Both languages are displayed for ambassadors’ work histories.

Limitations & considerations for further research and improvement

Considering the research was completed under a three month period, the tool is not bulletproof, and provided more time / resources, certain aspects could be improved. Several are listed below.

- Some very small countries are not visible on the SVG maps (e.g. Singapore, Bahrain, Micronesia, etc.); these countries can only be found via the search table on the left-hand side.
- For some ambassadors, biographical information simply could not be located through publicly accessible information. Other biographical accounts were inconsistent in format sometimes leading to missing information.
- Some minor inconsistencies in data reporting may account for small errors in the calculated final statistics, but not to a significant degree so as to alter the final conclusions.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Ambassador Burns, who even in the middle of a global pandemic and extraordinarily busy schedule, offered without hesitation to support an undergraduate project like this.

¹⁹ Vasco Asturiano, *Vasturiano/3d-Force-Graph*, HTML, 2020, <https://github.com/vasturiano/3d-force-graph>.

²⁰ “Twitter Publish,” accessed August 14, 2020, <https://publish.twitter.com/#>.

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