China's policy incoherence has disturbing echoes of the prelude to Europe's great war in 1914, says Kerry Brown.

The way that policy is made in China is opaque and hard-to-read. This often leads to a kind of imbalance in reporting, with a minimum of information on a topic producing a surplus of emphatic interpretation which tends to produce more heat than light. A case in point is the coverage of China-Japan tensions in the hawkish Beijing-based newspaper Global Times in late October 2013, which was marked by raucous editorials warning Japan that "the time for talking is over" and that "firm action" (albeit unspecified) had to be taken against it. The result was a host of worried reports and columns by many international observers who drew the conclusion that China and Japan were on the road to confrontation.

An assumption here is that the newspaper was reflecting and channelling the official government stance on the issue. Some analysts offered a more nuanced view: China's media may remain state-directed, but the power-elite's thinking is also routinely mediated by other actors in a way that renders it shadowy and unclear. In the end it can't be assumed that a media outlet such as the Global Times - for all its state links - is representative of anything but its own editors' opinions.

The point about mediation refers to substance as well as process. For policy- and decision-making in China occurs in a fragmented system. In foreign policy, for example, the "leading group on foreign affairs" - chaired by head of the Communist Party and state president Xi Jinping - has an overall coordinating role; but many interest-groups (the military, the provinces, state-owned enterprises, think-tanks, political networks) battle for influence and voice along the way. Moreover, no one really knows when the leading group meets, how it discusses issues, and what its actual work is. Many suspect the final "sign-off" on all important foreign-policy decisions is concentrated in the hands of a tiny handful of people, with Xi Jinping himself having the real say.

Many who fear that China, this mighty entity, is slowly coming to dominate the world might find comforting the fact that the country's approach to foreign-affairs (and to other policy areas) is so divided. But this disunity is a problem for everyone, far more than it might appear. A study of a wholly different historic and cultural issue - the Cambridge University historian Christopher Clark's magisterial account of the origins of the first world war - helps explain why.

1914, a century on

Clark's explanation of how this happened is compelling. At the heart of it is that in early 20th-century Europe, "the executive structures from which policies emerged were far from unified." He continues:
"Initiatives with a bearing on the course of a country’s policy could and did emanate from quite peripheral locations in the political structure. Factional alignments, functional frictions with government, economic or financial constraints and the volatile chemistry of public opinion all exerted a constantly varying pressure on decision making processes."

Clark describes this as "chaos".

A century on, his description has an uncanny relevance to China, of whose policy-making process these lines could be a description. Here too, mixed signals are everywhere: on cross-strait relations, China’s role in the region, its vision for its future. Some government actors counsel restraint and maintaining a low profile; others say that China needs loudly to proclaim its global priorities (especially as the US seems so stricken by its domestic problems).

Many accept that there is no straightforward answer to the simple question of who is really in charge of China’s global role. But moving beyond vague, abstract statements like the "Chinese dream" and "peaceful rise" to looking at the specifics of how China operates in the middle east, Latin America, Europe, the United States or Africa, it is clear that implementation of foreign-policy objectives [16] betrays a lack of executive coherence. Even if Xi Jinping’s positions in the leadership [17] has great symbolic power, it is far from clear if or how this is translated into practice.

China says it desires peace. There is little reason to doubt that. A largely peaceful global environment in the last three decades has allowed it to grow prosperous and brought it immense benefits. But a shadow on this benign picture presents an immediate cause for concern: the signs of a dysfunctional polity [18] within China, lacking proper means of forging consensus on tough internal and external issues.

The catastrophe that fell on Europe in 1914 because of the divisions between its policy-making entities, its leaders and its executives should give everyone pause. The danger is not that China is bellicose; it is that China might sleepwalk into escalating verbal and then physical fights with its neighbours. That would be calamitous for all. And it makes the disconnect that seems to exist in China at the moment - between the political leadership and those that are meant to carry out its wishes - deeply concerning.

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