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Chinese foreign policy

Not pointing or wagging but beckoning

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Defensive and assertive in its words, China for the time being has a bark that is worse than its bite



“WE ARE opposed to the practice of engaging in mutual finger-pointing among countries,” said China’s prime minister, Wen Jiabao, on March 14th, resisting for the moment his own index-finger-wagging habit. Speaking at a news conference, Mr Wen was at pains to dismiss suggestions that Chinese foreign policy was becoming more assertive. Not all Chinese officials seem to have got the message. In their dealings with a stricken West, they appear conflicted.

“There are already views about China’s arrogance, China’s toughness, and China’s inevitable triumph. You have given me an opportunity for me to explain how China conducts itself,” said Mr Wen. The opportunity was a rare one. Mr Wen is the only Politburo member to hold regular press conferences, just once a year at the end of the brief annual rubber-stamping session of China’s parliament, the National People’s Congress (NPC). He has only two to go before he steps down in 2013.

Mr Wen’s soft-spoken, laboriously delivered remarks mixed recrimination and defensiveness, offering few clues as to how the government will reconcile its traditional low-key approach to international affairs with growing nationalism at home. He castigated President Barack Obama for meeting the Dalai Lama last month and in January approving arms sales to Taiwan worth \$6.4 billion. These actions, he said, had “violated China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and had caused “serious disturbances” to the two countries’ relations. But he did not threaten any retaliation. Earlier warnings of sanctions against American companies selling weapons to Taiwan have yet to materialise.

In another swipe at America, Mr Wen said that attempting to boost exports by putting pressure on another country to appreciate its currency was a form of “trade protectionism”. Chinese officials anxiously await the

American Treasury's next twice-yearly report, due in April, on the currency policies of other countries. If it names China as a currency "manipulator", trade tensions are likely to rise. Mr Wen said he was a "staunch supporter of free trade" and denied China's currency, the yuan, was undervalued. He called for negotiations on a "win-win solution". Despite China's unyielding line on the yuan, some Western diplomats believe that the country will in fact allow it to appreciate in the coming months, though perhaps not by much. Foreign cajoling may not do the trick. But inflation might.

On some other Western worries there is also cautious optimism that pragmatism could prevail in Beijing. Mr Wen spent a long time at his press conference defending his record at the climate-change summit in Copenhagen in December, where China was widely accused of obduracy. He missed one leaders' meeting, he said, because he had not received a proper invitation. But since then China has restated its commitment to achieving a 40-45% reduction in carbon emissions per unit of GDP by 2020 compared with 2005. Mr Wen's report to the NPC called for an "industrial system and consumption pattern with low carbon emissions". He did not even mention carbon in his report to the session a year ago. Deborah Seligsohn of the World Resources Institute, an American think-tank, says this year's report showed a "clear and comprehensive" strategy for shifting China's economy away from carbon-intensive sectors.

Western officials also remain hopeful that China will acquiesce to another round of sanctions on Iran in order to persuade it to give up its nuclear ambitions. Late last year relations between China and Britain were strained by China's decision to ignore British pleas not to execute a British drug smuggler believed by his family to be mentally ill. But Britain's foreign secretary, David Miliband, visited China this week for an upgraded "strategic dialogue" between the two countries, previously held at the deputy-minister level.

Mr Miliband's Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, said non-committally after their meeting that China had become "more concerned" about the Iranian problem, but that it needed to be resolved through negotiations. A recent report by the International Crisis Group, a think-tank, said that if other UN Security Council members unanimously supported more sanctions, China was likely to delay rather than block such a move. As previously, however, it would try to water the sanctions down. China is reluctant to jeopardise its big oil interests in Iran.

Western governments are clearly eager not to antagonise China, even if they chafe at its foot-dragging. British officials chose photo opportunities for Mr Miliband that would highlight China's importance as a responsible world power, at a training facility near Beijing for UN peacekeepers, and a factory making solar panels. Privately, some Chinese officials warn of what could happen if the West becomes more confrontational. It could, says one, divide China and the West into "two worlds", with "endless conflict" between them.

On its handling of dissent, however, China shows no sign of compromise. Western governments have been pressing it about the fate of a human-rights lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, who was taken from his home by security police a year ago. Mr Yang, at the press conference with Mr Miliband, said Mr Gao had been convicted of subversion. But it was not clear if he was referring to a suspended sentence imposed in 2006 (after torture, Mr Gao alleged). Mr Miliband said he was given no news of Mr Gao's whereabouts. Western leaders, unnerved by Chinese finger-pointing, are at least used to the cold shoulder where human rights are concerned.