



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Not quite the usual Chinese purge - is Xi changing foreign policy by changing the minister?



The scene was not as dramatic and terrifying as the physical removal of former Chinese President Hu Jintao from the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party last October. However, the removal of Foreign Minister Qin Gang had a similar impact and fits into the same political culture of not contesting the decisions of the state and party leadership. The replacement of the chief of the Chinese diplomacy was carried out without mentioning his name. "China's top legislature has voted to appoint Wang Yi as foreign minister", a brief statement from state media announced last Tuesday. Qin Gang held one of the most significant posts in the Chinese government for a short time. He was minister for only seven months, perhaps even a month fewer, since he did not attend official meetings that often. The fact that he was the youngest (57 years old) official to be appointed to such a high position in the Chinese establishment will continue to make him a record-holder. But Qin Gang's contribution to Chinese foreign policy will not be regarded as very significant.

A blow to Xi Jinping

There are still issues for official Beijing, since on the day of his replacement, a digital purge was conducted by eliminating all of his activity from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Even if the reasons for his removal turn out not to be in the domain of his work but in the sphere of private affairs or corruption, which is also under speculation, the removal of Qin Gang leaves a deep scar on Xi Jinping's rule. The deposed foreign minister was considered a protégé of President Xi, his personal choice, which gives part of the answer to the meteoric rise of this bureaucrat, from the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through ambassador in Washington to chief of diplomacy in just a few years. Wang Yi, the long-time head of Chinese diplomacy (2013-2022), was returned to the vacant position. This move suggests that President Xi wants to return to a safe harbour as soon as possible, minimise turbulence and end the Qin Gang experiment as an unpleasant episode. Wang Yi is President Xi's first foreign minister, and has followed him throughout his

career as China's first man. He has not been in a ministerial but "only" in the position of the leading party official in charge of foreign affairs since the end of last year. This was not a demotion but an essential strengthening of his management of Chinese diplomacy. Foreign policy is determined and conducted at party level, with decisions being handed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the government, so Wang Yi, as acting minister, will now unite the two highest diplomatic posts in the country.

Internal and external damage to Beijing

The reasons for Qin Gang's removal will most likely not be available for a long time, in keeping with Chinese political tradition in such cases. It is possible that, at some point, there will be an announcement that Qin is under criminal investigation, or it will turn out that he has had inappropriate love affairs. But far more significant than this bureaucrat's fate is the political damage done to the establishment, specifically the damage Xi Jinping has done to himself. With Qin Gang as his personal choice for head of state, President Xi bears the brunt of either the ill-considered decision when Qin was appointed or the behaviour and decisions of his successor whilst in state office. In either case, Xi bears a significant risk to his reputation as an infallible leader, which was how he secured an unprecedented third term as head of party and state. With this unfortunate manoeuvre, from the point of view of Chinese foreign policy, Xi demonstrated unreliability towards the countries with which he cultivates partnerships and weakness and internal confusion regarding rivals and competitors. "Qin's removal will reinforce perceptions abroad that the Communist Party is an opaque and unreliable diplomatic partner... [and] does no favours for Beijing's international efforts to portray its governance system as worthy of praise and emulation", said Neil Thomas from the Asia Society Policy Institute.

The worst moment for the government leadership

The purge at the top of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs puts China in a very complex foreign policy situation whilst it attempts to increase its influence on global affairs. China has been very aggressively advocating a redesign of the global economic, political and security order, in an effort to ensure its model's leadership and dominance. Relations with the US, which in recent months have only started to emerge from an impasse, accompanied by multiple high-level meetings, is crucial to that doctrine, which China has been attempting to execute under the leadership of Xi Jinping. One of the most significant in that series, the visit of US state secretary Antony Blinken to Beijing last June, paved the way for new high-level meetings (US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, special climate envoy John Kerry), which should lead to a meeting between the two presidents Xi and Joe Biden, expected by the end of the year.

The US wants a smooth continuation, does China want the same?

However, after the dramatic replacement of the head of diplomacy Qin Gang, the question arises as to whether Beijing is ready to continue contact and agreements with Washington at the current pace. As for the US, according to Secretary Blinken, this purge will not have consequences. He said that the US would engage with "whoever the relevant Chinese counterparts" are in order to manage the US-China relationship. "I've also known Wang Yi for more than a decade. I've met with him repeatedly in my current capacity as Secretary of State and including just recently in Jakarta and I anticipate being able to work well with him as we have in the past", said Blinken. The removal of the head of diplomacy after only seven (or six) months may be the first move in Beijing's desire to reverse course, indicating that it does not share this viewpoint. The deposed minister Qin Gang was

regarded as a tough and unyielding diplomat in Washington (2021–2023), which is why he did not have many opportunities to meet high-ranking American interlocutors. Perhaps this attitude towards the US partly qualified him to advance even faster and become the head of diplomacy. But the speed, and in particular, the silence of the state apparatus that marked his removal suggest that the reasons were political, and that someone changed course in the meantime - either Minister Qin or whoever appointed him.