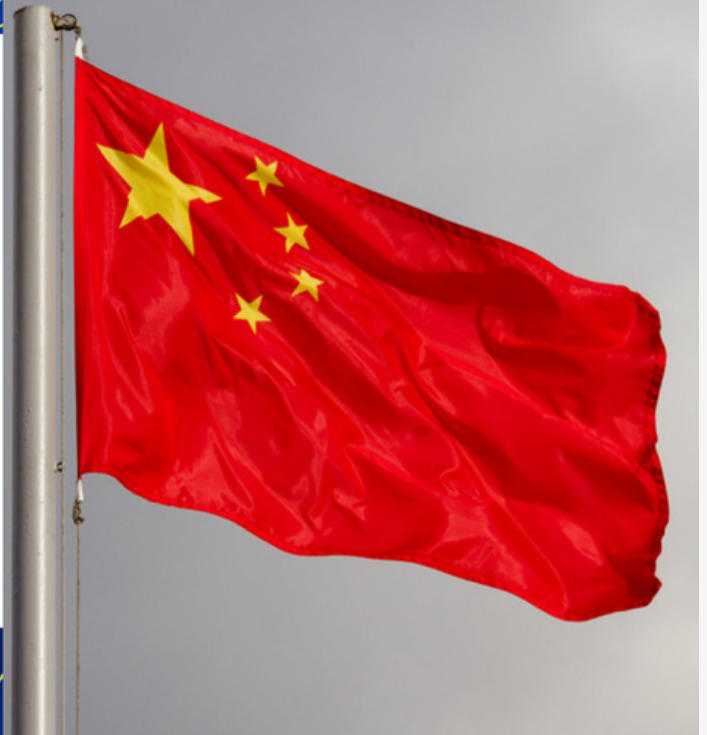


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**DIPLOMATIC CHANGES IN
CHINA: UNDERSTANDING THE
UNFORESEEN REPLACEMENT
OF THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN
AFFAIRS**

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Introduction

Since his last public appearance during a diplomatic meeting alongside Sri Lankan and Vietnamese foreign ministers in Beijing on 25 June, Qin Gang, the then Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, has vanished from the public eye (Le Monde, 2023). This unexpected turn of events has triggered a surge of inquiries within the global political landscape. Curiously, his disappearance has been followed by a sequence of intriguing developments, including his abrupt removal from the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs and the subsequent appointment of Wang Yi, his predecessor, as his replacement (Ng, 2023).

China's response to the unfolding situation has been characterised by attempts to downplay the affair's significance. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Mao Ning addressed the matter during a routine press briefing in Beijing, dismissing the speculations surrounding Qin Gang's absence as 'malicious conjecture' and asserting that pertinent information would be revealed in due course (France 24, 2023). Nevertheless, key details about Qin Gang's current status and the rationale behind his dismissal from office remain ambiguous. Notably, a conspicuous omission of more than 20 queries concerning Qin Gang from the official press conference records has raised legitimate questions (Davidson, 2023).

Information pertaining to the matter has been sparse and evasive in nature. The absence of Qin Gang has triggered a wave of speculation that transcends concerns solely about his well-being. This speculation encompasses a spectrum of topics, spanning apprehensions about his health, potential disruptions to diplomatic interactions involving foreign dignitaries and even conjecture regarding his potential involvement in a corruption inquiry (Colly, 2023). Moreover, the deliberate removal of references to Qin Gang's tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs from diverse government platforms, including official documents, transcripts and biographical details, has deepened the air of perplexity and intensified the ongoing conjecture regarding the motives underlying his disappearance (Davidson, 2023).

The enigmatic circumstances surrounding Qin Gang's vanishing act reverberate with significant implications, stretching beyond the realm of Chinese diplomacy. The episode serves to cast a spotlight on the lack of transparency of the broader Chinese political system (Levine et al., 2023). In the ensuing sections, we delve into the consequences of this enigma on the landscape of Chinese diplomacy and glean valuable insights into the functioning of the nation's political apparatus.

Implications for Chinese Diplomacy

This unexpected absence of a major actor in Chinese diplomacy raises a series of complex implications for China's global interactions. This situation invites analysis of three main hypotheses, each of which sheds light on the potential factors contributing to Qin Gang's vanishing.

One of the initial hypotheses being advanced to explain Qin Gang's mysterious disappearance focuses on his health as an underlying factor (Colly, 2023). Although Chinese officials initially cited health problems as the reason for his absence, the fact that these reasons have not been confirmed or verified has fuelled speculation and raised questions about the transparency of the regime (France 24, 2023). If this hypothesis proves to be true, it reveals a wider pattern of information control exercised by the Chinese government. This pattern was clearly illustrated during the COVID-19 epidemic, when the regime was sharply criticised for initially suppressing information about the disease, thereby delaying the international response and not exhibiting the transparency needed to contain the spread of the virus (Haenle, 2020).

The absence of reliable information on the state of health of a key diplomatic player reinforces the image of a government that favours the preservation of its image and control over open communication. It also highlights the challenges inherent in diplomacy when a senior official suddenly disappears, creating uncertainty about planned commitments and ongoing negotiations (Leplâtre, 2023).

The second hypothesis looks at the possibility of an alleged affair between Qin Gang and a well-known Chinese journalist, Fu Xiaotian, now suspected of espionage (Chen & Guzman, 2023). This perspective opens the way to wider concerns about the Chinese regime's management of the personal affairs of its senior officials. The situation is reminiscent of precedents where the Chinese government has been criticised for using accusations of espionage to suppress dissent or eliminate individuals deemed to be an embarrassment to the government apparatus (Gan, 2023). The allegation of espionage, if proven, could reveal another facet of the Chinese government's actions to maintain control and eliminate any unwanted influence. It reinforces apprehensions about the reliability and integrity of Chinese officials, particularly those involved in international diplomatic positions (Leplâtre, 2023). The Chinese government's handling of this situation, whether through a transparent investigation or a lack of response, will send a powerful message about how China deals with potential allegations of espionage and compromising behaviour (Davidson, 2023).

The third hypothesis puts the emphasis on possible internal dissension within the Chinese political apparatus. Qin Gang's rapid ascent within the diplomatic service may have caused disruption within factions in the Communist Party (Colly, 2023). This hypothesis highlights the internal power struggles that are often a feature of Chinese governance. One example is the ousting of senior politicians such as former leader Bo Xilai, whose departure was interpreted as the result of internal battles for power and influence (Pedroletti, 2023). If this hypothesis proves to be at the root of Qin Gang's disappearance, it would reflect the Chinese regime's ongoing challenge to maintain apparent cohesion despite divergent currents of thought within the Party. These possible rivalries could not only influence the composition of the political elite but also have repercussions for Chinese foreign policy (Levine et al., 2023). Internal disagreements could shape the country's diplomatic direction, highlighting the tensions between more conciliatory and more assertive approaches. The Chinese authorities' handling of this situation, whether through calmer internal dialogue or disciplinary measures, will reflect the stability and cohesion of the Communist Party leadership (Leplâtre, 2023).

Diplomatic Developments From Qin Gang to Wang Yi

Wang Yi, aged 69, is a familiar figure on the international stage, holding the position of China's top diplomat as head of the Communist Party's Central Foreign Affairs Commission (Ng, 2023). Unlike many countries, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs is not the most influential authority in the country's diplomatic affairs. Other members of the Chinese Communist Party leadership, including the head of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, a position that Mr Wang still holds, have more influence in formulating foreign policy (Ng, 2023). This return to his former post signals a return to his roots for Wang Yi, which he has held for most of the last decade. As one of the leading 'warrior wolf' diplomats, adept at combative rhetoric towards those who contravene Beijing, Wang Yi is a well-known figure in the United States (Cheng, 2023). His meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in June illustrated his firm stance on Washington's restrictive policies towards China while underlining the need for the U.S. to review its approach and work with China to manage differences and avoid strategic surprises (Ng, 2023).

Wang Yi, who studied Japanese at university, joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the age of 29. He served as China's ambassador to Tokyo from 2004 to 2007, then headed the Taiwan Affairs Office from 2008 until his first appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2013. His varied diplomatic experience, particularly with the United States and Japan, could bring a balanced perspective to China's foreign relations (Lepître, 2023).

Wang Yi's return to the post is seen by some observers as a strategy to stabilise Chinese diplomacy in turbulent times. With the country's economy struggling to recover from the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and relations with the United States strained, Wang Yi could be seen as a figure of continuity and predictability in a period of uncertainty (Ng, 2023). The appointment also suggests that President Xi Jinping is opting for an interlocutor with established relationships with many foreign counterparts for upcoming international meetings (Levine et al., 2023).

The switch between Qin Gang and Wang Yi marks a change in Chinese diplomacy while highlighting caution and stability in the management of foreign relations. Wang Yi's long diplomatic experience and knowledge of global issues could help guide China through the challenges and opportunities on the international stage (Cheng, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the disappearance of Qin Gang and the transition to Wang Yi as Minister of Foreign Affairs have far-reaching implications for Chinese diplomacy, as it involves an abrupt change in its political approach. Three hypotheses have been explored: Qin Gang's health problems underlining the government's control of information, allegations of espionage linked to an alleged affair between Qin Gang and a Chinese journalist and internal political friction. The return of Wang Yi, a senior diplomat, underlines China's desire for continuity and stability in its foreign relations. However, these events also illustrate the challenges China faces in managing transparency, the personal issues of its officials, and internal political dynamics while adapting to an ever-changing global context. These changes help define the evolution of Chinese diplomacy and its proactive role on the international stage.

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