Due to the significant strengthening of China's all-round national strength and also in light of changes in China's immediate surroundings, over the past few years, Beijing's foreign policy and approaches towards its closest neighbours are subject to revision. On the one hand, Beijing, with access to a vaster array of resources to project its power and fulfil its national interests, is increasing pressure on its neighbouring countries over territorial issues in the South China and East China seas, and, on the other hand, is increasingly employing economic and public diplomacy. However, the rise of Chinese assertiveness in territorial disputes with its neighbours, which has become quite tangible since 2007-2008 has led to the aggravation of relations between Beijing and a number of its neighbouring countries in East Asia and has started to have a very negative impact on the regional situation in the largest East Asian state. The development of these unfavourable trends has resulted in Beijing being forced to make an adjustment foreign policy towards its neighbours in 2013, which resulted in China's foreign policy doctrine gaining the concept of "neighbouring diplomacy" (a notional translation of the Chinese term "(zhoubian waijiao") as a complex multi-level set of measures aimed at harmonising China's relations with neighbouring countries in the new order.

The growing concern about the deterioration of the situation in China's immediate surroundings manifested itself in October 2013 when Beijing held a central meeting on work in the field of its foreign policy activity, especially dedicated to the issues related to cooperation with its neighbouring countries. What was extraordinary about this event was that the previous central meeting on work in the field of foreign policy activity was held solely in 2006 and it concerned foreign policy activity in general and there were no specialized meetings on the policy of Beijing's neighbourly relations. It is also significant that of the 22 countries that Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang paid an official visit to in their first year in top government posts, 12 were China's neighbours.

The appearance of an alarmist article by the authoritative Chinese-foreign researcher Yan Xuetong in China Daily in January 2015 is telling. It raises the question of what is more important for China: developing relations with the US or with its neighbours. Citing a number of weighty arguments, Yan Xuetong clearly asserts the priority of relations with neighbours.

Yan Xuetong's framing of the question is not accidental. Since the end of the 1990s, the development of relations with neighbouring countries has not been a priority for the Chinese leadership, who aimed to present China as a world power, which was interested in improving relations primarily with leading world states (and, in particular, with the United States.) Since 2002, in the Chinese President's summary reports given every 5 years at the CPC Congresses, the strict hierarchy of Chinese priorities has remained unchanged: developed, neighbouring and finally, developing countries (although up until 1997, the order looked radically different: neighbouring states, third world countries and developed states.)

However, the deterioration of relations between China and a number of Asian neighbours which has become apparent since the end of the 2010s, has forced the Chinese leadership to look at the arrangement of its foreign policy priorities in the area of increasing the role of the development of relations with neighbouring countries in a new way.

Starting in 2013, the concept of “neighbouring diplomacy” has become a keystone in China’s official discourse. This
concept can be understood in both a narrow and broad sense: the first involves China implementing its task of harmonizing its relations with its neighbouring countries against the backdrop of the deepening territorial disputes between them, and dispel the “Chinese threat” theory. The second has a deeper dimension, in this sense, China’s “neighbouring diplomacy” aims at strengthening its role as a regional leader by way of managing regional integration processes in line with China’s own vision.

In essence, China's "neighbouring diplomacy" is a combination of traditional diplomacy, economic and public diplomacy in relation to its neighbours. Economic diplomacy is aimed at deepening its neighbouring countries’ economic dependence on China by promoting trade links (for example, by introducing special preferential treatment in trade with these countries), increasing the use of the Chinese currency for inter-regional payments, increasing investment and assisting in the development of neighbouring countries, which includes collaborating with them in the implementation of major infrastructure projects. Public diplomacy is aimed at fostering a positive image of China among its neighbours, and includes measures to expand the presence of the Chinese media in neighbouring countries, attract a growing number of foreign students from neighbouring countries to study in China, and increase the number and presence of Confucius Institutes, among others, throughout the region.

Against the background of deepening conflicts in territorial disputes with its neighbours, the new Chinese leadership has employed a series of measures aimed at strengthening neighbourhood relations, expanding its influence and restoring China’s image in the region since 2013, by embarking on a second wave of a so-called “charm offensive” (the first wave occurred approximately 1997-2007.) Over the course of 2013, with the aim of improving relations with its neighbours, Beijing intensified its diplomatic activity, strengthened its economic diplomacy and offered countries in the region a number of attractive large-scale economic projects.

For example, in early September 2013 a Chinese mega-project in the Eurasian space entitled the "Silk Road Economic Belt" was widely announced. Its specific role is to deepen cooperation between China and its Central Asian neighbours and Russia. In October 2013 during meetings with the leaders of APEC and the East Asia Summit, the Chinese party put forward a series of initiatives in the field of trade and infrastructural development of the region. Xi Jinping proposed establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and outlined China’s intention to increase trade with ASEAN from the then level of $400 billion to $1 trillion by 2020. In Xi Jinping’s unprecedented speech before the parliaments of Thailand and Indonesia, Beijing presented its strategic concept of Community with a Common Destiny, China-ASEAN, and the blueprint for a "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", which involves the construction of ports and the development of China’s maritime links with the countries of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. In 2014, a number of sub-regional initiatives were put forward, such as the creation of the Bangladesh-China-India-Burma economic corridor and the establishment of a mechanism of dialogue and cooperation between countries of the Lancang-Mekong River Basin.

China has also intensified its efforts to establish a vast free trade area, which would link the economies of China with the whole of East Asia and even the Asia-Pacific Region. This idea gained momentum in the form of two options, which Beijing is actively promoting: the establishment of an integrated regional economic partnership and a free trade area in the Asia-Pacific region.

Over time, China’s “neighbouring diplomacy“ has begun to take on scope, scale and a multi-vectored nature. This is demonstrated by the development of events and how the initiatives proposed by Beijing are systematically coming to fruition.

Not limiting itself to the task of expanding its diplomatic and economic presence in its near surroundings, Beijing has started putting together its conceptual vision of its special place in the region, which are addressed to its neighbouring countries. Beijing is trying to convince its neighbours of the idea that the “Chinese dream” and the other nations’ interests and dreams of national revival are dependent on one another and inter-linked. The establishment of good neighbourly relations is not only seen in the suggestion of the strategic concept of a Community with a Common Destiny, China-ASEAN, in the autumn of 2013, but also in Xi Jinping's public mention in September 2014 of Deng Xiaoping's concept of the "Asian century", which will come to be only under the right conditions for achieving the development of China, India and several other neighbouring countries to China. At the APEC summit in November 2014, Beijing the general idea of a common "Asia-Pacific dream" for all countries in the region was aired, which encapsulates the desire for prosperity and security, creates the conditions for this, as well as having the aim of ensuring that the region remains at the forefront of world development and makes a significant contribution to the prosperity of humanity Later, China began to actively promote the idea of a common destiny of the Asian community. Underlying all of these concepts is the over-arching idea of inter-connection between the countries in the region, the need for their solidarity in order to achieve prosperity and security (this means solidarity
under the auspices of China). The task, which Beijing is leading by pushing forward similar concepts - dispelling of the fear that was aggravated in its closest neighbours from 2007-2008 about the “Chinese threat”, convincing its neighbours that the rise of China brings prosperity to the whole region, that the desires and dreams of the region of national economic development can only be fully brought about by way of close cooperation with China.

However, the "neighbouring diplomacy" of China, which seemed to demonstrate positive trends the development of Beijing's contacts with its neighbours in 2013, began to falter in the case of countries with which China has territorial disputes (a number of countries in South-East Asia and Japan.) Another round of escalation of the situation in the South China and East China Seas, which started in May 2014 and continues to this day, largely because of China's assertive behaviour, was evidence of the failure of the second wave of the "charm offensive": China's image continues to fall in a number of countries in the region, and the fear of the increasingly powerful East Asian neighbour is on the rise. Some East Asian countries are showing a growing concern about their increasing economic dependence on China. Among the expert community of South-East Asia, in particular, opinions on the urgent need to diversify trade partners and artificially reduce the economic dependence on China are increasingly heard. Often such characteristic foreign policy conduct of contemporary China, provided by politicians and experts in Asian countries as an example of the significant discrepancy between the grand words and promises of Chinese dignitaries to its neighbours and Beijing's real foreign policy steps and actions towards them.

Thus, at this stage, when there is a combination of "neighbouring diplomacy" and a contradictory approach to the development of relations with neighbouring countries, which involves putting pressure on its neighbours in territorial disputes (as well as in other matters where the parties' positions are diametrically opposed), "neighbouring diplomacy" does not bring about the desired results of China's harmonisation of relations with the countries concerned, and does not lead to the provision of a favourable neighbouring environment, and in a broad sense, to the approval of China as a regional leader.

Yana Leksyutina, Ph.D. in Political Sciences, Lecturer at St. Petersburg State University, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook"