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189

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- Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China's foreign politics has taken a turn towards a more proactive approach, especially with a view to facilitating China's economic development through trade.
- A new set of foreign policy concepts has emerged, emphasizing China's desire to build a "world truly shared by all" where peace, cooperation and common prosperity reign. The concepts are meant to offer a rhetoric-level challenge to the founding ideas of the Westphalian system and the perceived dominance of the West.
- The need to ensure economic growth and the desire to portray oneself as a challenger to the West both arise from domestic politics, namely safeguarding the legitimacy of the Communist Party. It is questionable whether the two goals can be reconciled in the long term.
- Xi has been making public appearances which make him seem like a statesman and a strong leader even in the field of foreign relations. Whether China's foreign policy strategy is becoming more assertive as a result remains to be seen, but at least before its centennial in 2021, the Party must present itself as patriotic and unwaveringly dedicated to the restoration of China's greatness.

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Chinese politics is customarily personified in the incumbent leader, and the era of Xi Jinping is no exception in this regard. Indeed, Xi is said to have amassed more power than any Chinese leader for decades. The catchphrase for China under Xi's leadership is the *Chinese Dream*, coined to guide China's development in the coming decades. According to Xi, the realization of the Dream equates to the "grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

In the light of the historical narrative of the Communist Party, the rejuvenation implies ridding China of any remnants of past humiliations brought about by colonial powers and wars. Realizing the Dream even has a timetable, based on two upcoming centennials. The first is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 2021, and the second is the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic in 2049. By the first centennial, the standard of living of the Chinese population should reach the level of a "moderately well-off society", a goal set by Deng Xiaoping at the launch of his economic reforms. This stresses the importance of economic development, which is seen as the most important foundation of the Party's legitimacy.

By the second centennial, China's rejuvenation should be complete. This is commonly perceived both in China and abroad to mean that, by then, China should become a superpower, not only in economic but also in political and military terms. These goals are still decades away, but China is already well on its way to the status of the largest economy in the world, although not in per capita terms. The thinking in China, especially among the hawks (often senior military officials or party-affiliated international relations scholars), is that because China will inevitably surpass the USA as the leading superpower, it must duly challenge the US hegemony sooner rather than later. An international order which is dominated by the USA and based on the rules set up by the "West" does not serve China's interests in the long term, or so the argument goes.

Naturally, the hardline discourse is not the only one that matters. It is widely recognized in China that the country has benefitted from the liberal order. International relations theorist John Ikenberry argues that the rise of China does not pose a challenge to the prevailing liberal international order. While China may be seen as seeking leadership of the said order, it is not challenging it but utilizing

it for the purposes of its rise. The liberal order as a rule-based system is beneficial for China and, in any case, it is easier to join a system than it is to overthrow one.¹ In other words, China ultimately wants to join the club of great powers, and not create a club of its own.

There are also those members of the Chinese elite who do not believe in the creation of any alternative great power identities which would be different from those of the Western powers.² Of course, China is a member of the UN and has thus accepted the Westphalian system in practice. Nevertheless, Xi is playing on the theme of challenge. In May 2014, he questioned the role of the US in Asia by emphasizing that the region's security is best protected by the Asians themselves.³

This theme of challenge is further demonstrated by Xi's foreign policy concepts, as well as some concrete developments. For example, China's declaration of the air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in 2013, or the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014, could be seen as China's attempts to challenge US dominance in the region. This Briefing Paper reviews the new concepts and related rhetoric, and examines their background.

Proactive peripheral diplomacy

Chinese and foreign observers alike have noted that Xi's foreign policy line started to become visible at a forum on peripheral diplomacy in autumn 2013. Following a debate over the last two years, China now seems to be preparing to abandon the guiding strategy set by Deng Xiaoping, the last omnipotent leader of the Communist Party. This strategy dictated that China should lay low in the international arena and concentrate on building its domestic economy. Instead, Xi Jinping has proposed

1 Ikenberry, G. J. "The Illusion of Geopolitics. The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, no. 3, May/June 2014: 80–90.

2 Suzuki, S. "Journey to the West: China Debates Its 'Great Power' Identity". *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 42(3), 2014: 635.

3 *Xinhua*wang, 21 May 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/21/c_1110796357.htm.

the tactic of being proactive. Deng's strategy was formulated in a pair of four-character phrases: *tao-guang yanghui*, *yousuo zuowei*, translated literally as "hide your brightness and foster furtiveness, and then there may be accomplishments". Xi's favoured phrase is just one four-character phrase, and although it is used alone, it is perhaps best seen as a replacement for the latter part of Deng's formulation. Xi's phrase, *fenfa youwei*, can be translated as "exerting oneself will bring success". "Then" has thus become "now", but the priority of domestic development still remains, despite the hawks in China's internal debate calling for China to stop laying low altogether.

The new proactive line has been demonstrated in particular in China's peripheral diplomacy, namely the country's activities in its neighbouring regions. China has launched the One Belt, One Road initiative, aimed at strengthening the integration of land and sea traffic lanes across Eurasia. This initiative is supported by a special fund as well as the AIIB, which focuses on financing infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region.

While these initiatives have generally been well received by China's neighbours, some other activities have not, the ADIZ being a case in point. The same goes for the South China Sea, where China has artificially enlarged several reefs and islets which it occupies so that they can accommodate air strips and port facilities. Such "island building" serves first and foremost to facilitate China's effective control of those land features and thus the strengthening of China's territorial claims, but it also says something about the economic importance of the region. Sea lines crucial for the economies in East Asia cross the South China Sea, there are important fisheries, and the seabed is expected to contain significant hydrocarbon resources. The fact that China has in recent years been referring to itself as a "near-Arctic state" also indicates how important different types of transportation arteries are for the country. China needs alternative routes for reasons of security of supply and in order to keep the wheels of production in motion. The country's peripheral diplomacy is therefore very much driven by economic priorities.

A new type of international relations and the Chinese version of justice

The launch of a proactive peripheral diplomacy was accompanied by a call to develop "major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics". While "major power diplomacy" has been in the Chinese foreign policy vocabulary since the 1990s, referring to China's relations with the USA and Russia, the new phrase directs attention to China itself, and suggests that the country must act responsibly in accordance with its new position as one of the major powers. According to Xi, this implies that while China is committed to following the road of peaceful development, it must not abandon its legitimate rights nor sacrifice its core interests. Furthermore, China will strive for the democratization of the international system with the understanding that the fate of the world must be decided by the peoples of all countries alike.⁴

The goal of the new type of diplomacy is to create "a new type of major power relations". This concept can be traced back at least to the time of Jiang Zemin, who stressed that China should develop partnerships with other major countries, which should be neither alliances nor adversarial and which should pose no threat to third countries. The younger sibling of this concept is a "new type of international relations".

According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, "a new type of international relations is aimed at replacing confrontation with cooperation, and exclusiveness with win-win cooperation". He has further expounded that the older ways of perceiving the international system must be discarded in favour of China's idea. These older ways would include "hegemonic stability", which according to him calls for "the creation of an omnipotent superpower to command world affairs"; "global governance", which argues that "nations should dilute sovereignty and engage in the formulation of common rules for world governance"; and "universal values", which indicate "that a certain kind of values and social system, believed to be 'superior' to others, be used to govern our world".⁵

4 Xinhuaawang, 29 Nov 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm.

5 CIIS.org.cn, 9 Jul 2015. http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2015-07/09/content_8056494.htm.

When addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, Xi Jinping stated that “big countries should treat small countries as equals, and take a right approach to justice and interests by putting justice before interests”.⁶ The idea that foreign relations should be guided by “a correct handling of justice and interests (or benefits)” has been promulgated in many authoritative articles. According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, achieving a proper balance between the two has always been a key principle in the Chinese tradition, so that justice should come first.⁷ Indeed, according to Confucius, when one is offered benefits, one must consider whether they are justified or not.

Correspondingly, some Chinese scholars argue that China’s foreign relations traditionally bore similarities to the idealistic school of International Relations because of the influence of Confucianism, which stated that one does not need to disregard a benefit, but one must not gain it through unjust means. This is allegedly the reason why China emphasizes justice more than other countries: after all, China’s peaceful rise is only possible through cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, and cooperation is not possible without all the countries putting justice and the common good ahead of their own interests. It is nevertheless always emphasized that tradition must not be allowed to lead one astray: aiming for global justice must not lead to neglecting one’s national interests.

There are other viewpoints as well. Ye Zicheng, a prominent scholar from Peking University, has emphasized that even when viewed from a traditional Confucian perspective, justice and interests should remain in equilibrium. In his view, this supports the fact that a country cannot abandon its core interests, meaning that China should neither act blindly in accordance with some abstract principles, nor concentrate on its own profit or external fame. While China has a duty to help poorer countries, it should act in accordance with the circumstances

and its own resources.⁸ Another view regards “interests” as economic interests and “justice” as political and security interests. This means that sacrificing interests for the sake of justice does not mean putting the greater good of the global community above China’s own needs but, on the contrary, that economic interests can be abandoned for the sake of national security.⁹ All of these views underline that the meaning of justice should not be understood as a universal concept but as the action which is good for China.

In his UN address, Xi also mentioned “a community of shared future for Mankind”, more literally translated as “the commonwealth of the destiny of humankind”. Already at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Hu Jintao called for building “a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity”, and then introduced the phrase “the commonwealth of the destiny of humankind” when discussing the world and China’s place in it.¹⁰ In 2013, Xi stressed that the “awareness of community of common destiny” should “take root in the neighboring countries”.¹¹ Xi thus used the formulation to strengthen China’s new emphasis on its neighbourhood, before extending it to the whole world.

As we can see, several concepts have grown in prevalence in the rhetoric concerning China’s foreign relations during Xi’s era. Most of these were also present in Xi’s recent UN speech. Like the Chinese Dream or the Grand Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, these concepts originated in the speeches of Xi’s predecessors, but the way in which they are accredited to Xi himself today seems to be an orchestrated effort to bolster his authority as China’s supreme leader.

6 The official UN translation is available at: http://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70_ZH_en.pdf.

7 Wang, Y. “Jianchi zhengque yi-liguan, jiji fahui fuzeren daguo zuoyong”. Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi (ed.), *Jiedu Zhongguo Waijiao Xin Lilun*. Wuzhou Chuanbo Chubanshe, Beijing 2014: 27.

8 *Renmin luntan*, 7 Feb. 2014. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0207/c112851-24291830.html>.

9 Xu J. & Du Z. “The Dominant Thinking Sets in Chinese Foreign Policy Research: A Criticism”. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (Autumn 2015) 8 (3): 277–278.

10 *People.com*, 17 Nov. 2012. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2012/1117/c1024-19611447-8.html>.

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC website, 25 Oct. 2013. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1093870.shtml.

An ideal world is not one ruled by the West

Xi Jinping encapsulated the themes underlying the abovementioned concepts in his UN address by quoting “an ancient Chinese adage” that says, in the official translation, that “the greatest ideal is to create a world truly shared by all”.¹² The adage is actually a quotation by Confucius. In Chinese, the “world truly shared by all” is *Tianxia wei gong*. The word *Tianxia* literally means “All-Under-Heaven”. Seen from the Chinese perspective, the *Tianxia* was a Chinese form of empire in which the lesser states could live in peace as long as they recognized the over-lordship of the emperor, and thus the idea was very different from the European empires based on hegemonic coercion.

Today, the concept of *Tianxia* has become pivotal in the discourse relating to a Chinese international relations theory or model. Many Chinese thinkers want to expand All-Under-Heaven into a form of cosmopolitanism, the logic being that *Tianxia* can be understood not only as the empire, but as the world. The *Tianxia* ideal is presented as an alternative to the contemporary international system, which is regarded as flawed and plagued by conflicting national interests. Again, seen from the Chinese perspective, the Westphalian system signifies merely a loose collection of states driven by their own national interests.

According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the Westphalian system “failed in the end to prevent major-power rivalry in Europe”, and the same fate befell the 19th century Vienna system based on the equilibrium of power as well. Wang hails the UN Charter as “a giant step forward in the history of human civilization” but laments that its purposes and principles are so often not followed. Therefore, Wang explains, China proposes building a new type of international relations which “originates from the rich cultural tradition of the Chinese nation” as a solution.¹³

The Chinese *Tianxia* idealism is vulnerable to criticism from several angles. First, there seems to be a lack of a pathway connecting the ideal with the real, future world. Second, the inherent hierarchicalness of the system cannot be easily explained away.

12 The official UN translation.

13 CIIS.org.cn, 9 Jul. 2015.

Third, projecting an ideal which was essentially a model for an empire onto the world as a model for the international system requires a significant leap of faith. Perhaps it is best to recall the popular usage of the world *Tianxia*, which indicates that there can be several *Tianxias* in existence at the same time, ours and theirs.¹⁴

Let us look at the meaning of the phrase *Tianxia wei gong*. There are good grounds for regarding the idea as “domestic” in nature. Originally, the phrase – when it first appeared in the ancient *Book of Rites* commending an even more ancient ideal society – referred to the principle that the throne is not the monopoly of any given clan but should be bequeathed to the most able. In other words, it meant that the empire should be no one’s monopoly. This is rather different from a world which can truly be shared by all.

Nevertheless, perhaps it may be regarded as a natural evolution that the originally domestic concept of *Tianxia* has now become “internationalized”. On the other hand, it has been said that China’s foreign politics have always been driven first and foremost by domestic forces.¹⁵ Therefore, we may arguably postulate that Xi Jinping was sending more than one message by quoting the ancient adage, at least for the home audience. Perhaps the other message was: The international order – and the creation of its rules and principles – is no one’s monopoly, certainly not the monopoly of the West.

China equals tradition equals rule by virtue equals Xi Jinping

The Communist Party needs the support of the people to survive. One way in which the Party wishes to ensure its continuing legitimacy is through economic growth. Thus the facilitation of economic development will remain the cornerstone of China’s foreign relations in the years to come. Xi’s recent African round-trip and the impressive list of economic treaties which were concluded during the

14 During the war against Japan, the Chinese could say, for example: “Manchuria now belongs to the *Tianxia* of the Japanese”.

15 Lampton, D. M. “Xi Jinping’s China: Uncertainties.” *SAIS Magazine*, Spring 2015: 19.

state visits is the latest link in the chain used to ensure both the import of raw materials and food as well as the export of goods and services. Similar efforts are likely to continue.

Another way to help the Party's survival is to flirt with nationalism. In 2014, the University of International Relations in Beijing compiled the first ever research report on China's national security. While stressing the concrete dangers of domestic terrorism, it also lists Western democratic values and Western cultural hegemony as major threats to China's "ideological security".¹⁶ Therefore, it is in the interests of the Communist Party to continue propping up the so-called socialist core values – said to include, inter alia, prosperity, civility, harmony, equality, patriotism, dedication, and integrity – with values hand-picked from Chinese traditional schools of thought. By providing the people with a patriotically appealing, historically Chinese "faith", it is hoped that the people will turn away from Western value systems or religions.

Nationalism is also why China must present itself – at least to the domestic audience – as a serious challenger to the "US hegemony". It is no surprise, then, that Xi Jinping's "new type of international relations" is claimed to be Chinese, based on China's long politico-philosophical tradition. In reality, the Chinese-ness is often no more than an edifice that it has been necessary to erect in order to make the ideas behind it look homegrown, and to give them historical clout. This shows how domestic politics is indeed the driving force behind foreign policy in China.

One Western observer, critical of the efforts to introduce elements of Confucian thinking into the field of international relations, warns that they reflect an aspiration to offer "the monist, hierarchic and self-consciously virtocratic Confucian model of authority as a template for the entire international system".¹⁷ Whether this proves to be the case or not, it is by no means self-evident that the two different

goals – facilitating economic growth through global cooperation while simultaneously challenging the West in different arenas – can be kept in balance.

The Communiqué of the Fourth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China states: "We ... must persist in the integration of ruling the country according to the law (*yi fa zhi guo*) and ruling the country by virtue (*yi de zhi guo*)".¹⁸ The latter part of the phrase reeks of Confucian political ideals. It has even led some pundits to speculate whether Xi Jinping wants to be seen as leading by means of his own personal virtue, similar to the mythical "sage kings" of yore. These speculations are supported by Xi's actions at least to some extent.

Xi has been making public appearances which make him look like a true statesman. These are probably targeted at both domestic and foreign audiences. In September, when addressing the UN General Assembly, Xi made a significant pledge towards the UN peace-keeping operations. This move was surely aimed at raising China's – and Xi's personal – prestige. In November 2015, Xi met his Taiwanese counterpart in Singapore. While hailed as an historic first meeting between the presidents of the two Chinas, the real importance of the meeting lay in giving Xi the opportunity to manifest his magnanimity and peace-loving nature.

Similarly, Xi is coming across as a strong leader of China's foreign relations. As described above, many of his concepts and policies are a continuation of his predecessors' work, dating all the way back to Chairman Mao Zedong's anti-hegemonic stand. However, history seems to be consciously forgotten, and China's "new" policy lines are being attributed to Xi personally. This is not an uncommon practice in China, but the upcoming centennial of the Communist Party in 2021 makes it more necessary than ever to present the Party as strong and united under firm leadership and heading in a clear direction. The Chinese people must be made to believe that the Chinese Dream will be realized.

In a similar Confucian vein it has been suggested in China that the leader of the *Tianxia* system

16 *Guanchazhe*, 7 May 2014. http://www.guancha.cn/politics/2014_05_08_227747.shtml.

17 Ford, C. A. "The Party and the Sage: Communist China's use of quasi-Confucian rationalizations for one-party dictatorship and imperial ambition". *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, Issue 96, 2015: 1045.

18 *Xinhua*wang, 23 October, 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/23/c_1112953884.htm.

– because a leader it must have due to its inherently hierarchical nature – should be the one country that manifests the most virtuous politics. Although in the minds of Chinese nationalists the most virtuous country in the world is by its Confucian design China, it is farfetched to think that Xi Jinping himself has such far-reaching ambitions as seeing China as the leader of All-Under-Heaven, not to mention imagining himself at its helm.

Nevertheless, Xi is undoubtedly strengthening his position as the ruler of “their” *Tianxia*. China’s activity indicates that it is aiming to engage its neighbouring areas, as well as economically important partners in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, in closer cooperation. There are many obstacles in the way – historical grievances in East Asia, territorial disputes in Southeast Asia, and geopolitical rivalries in South and Central Asia – but China genuinely needs a politically stable and economically vibrant environment for its growth. Looking further ahead, beyond the era of Xi Jinping, the future is more likely to hold a polarization between the *Tianxias* of China and the West than a world truly shared by all, but all that remains to be seen.

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Cover image: Screenshot from a CCTV News video celebrating the second anniversary of the establishing of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms under the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. The text reads: “Once the bow is shot there is no turning back for the arrow.”
Source: video.sina.com.cn.

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