



Xi Jinping's Diplomatic Philosophy and Vision for International Order: Continuity and Change from the Hu Jintao Era

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This article compares the diplomatic philosophy and vision for international order held by Xi Jinping and that of his predecessor, Hu Jintao. It focuses on foreign policy initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative, to explore how Xi sees the world, what his diplomatic agenda is, how he has contextualized this agenda, and what policies he has developed to achieve it. It also discusses the ways in which Xi has maintained the direction of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, and the ways in which he has altered it. The article concludes with an examination of how Xi's vision for international order differs from the existing international system.

Introduction

This article discusses how Xi Jinping has maintained the diplomatic philosophy and vision for international order held by his predecessor, Hu Jintao, and how he has changed it. Focusing on various foreign policy initiatives, including the now well-known Belt and Road Initiative (initially known in English as “One Belt One Road”), this article explores how Xi sees the world, what his diplomatic agenda is, how he has contextualized this agenda, and what policies he has developed to achieve it. It also discusses the ways in which Xi has maintained the direction of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, and the ways in which he has altered it. The article concludes with an examination of how Xi's vision for international order differs from the existing international system.

These issues have been discussed in the past, and they continue to attract scholarly attention today. Much of the debate has focused on whether China is challen-

ging the existing international order, particularly from 2018, a year of mounting US-China tension. Arthur Waldron argued that friction and conflict will be unavoidable as long as China maintains its present political and economic structure (“China, it turns out, cannot swim in the existing international sea”).¹ On the other hand, scholars in China (or from among the Chinese diaspora) have produced many research papers and articles elaborating on the Chinese government’s position. Among these, Yan Xuetong (who does not just provide simple commentary on Chinese government policies) contributed an article to *Foreign Affairs* titled “The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chinese Power in a Divided World.” The article includes the following passage on US-Chinese bipolarity:²

For some time to come, then, U.S.-Chinese bipolarity will not be an ideologically driven, existential conflict over the fundamental nature of the global order; rather, it will be a competition over consumer markets and technological advantages, playing out in disputes about the norms and rules governing trade, investment, employment, exchange rates, and intellectual property. And rather than form clearly defined military-economic blocs, most states will adopt a two-track foreign policy, siding with the United States on some issues and China on others.

Although questions about US-Chinese bipolarity and China’s role in such a bipolar system persist, American and Japanese scholars would probably agree with Xuetong’s forecast on how the US-Chinese rivalry will play out in the future. Of course, there is also the view in the English-speaking world (excepting Arthur Waldron) that exploring ways to share world order with China should still be considered.³

As for the literature on China’s vision for international order, there is a sizeable body of Chinese-language literature, but many of the works focus on explaining the government’s position. There is also a body of Japanese-language literature, which offers a more critical take on the recent trends and continues to be updated with successive developments.⁴ Building on the findings of this literature, this article focuses on how Xi Jinping has continued, and how he has broken away from, the diplomatic philosophy and vision for international order of the Hu Jintao era. One way of approaching this issue is to analyze the regime’s foreign policy and the actions it has taken. However, the focus of this analysis is the speeches Xi has delivered at international summits.

Diplomatic philosophy and vision for international order during the formative stages of the Xi Jinping regime

Formative stages of Xi’s regime: setting the tone

Commentators frequently claim that Xi Jinping’s diplomatic philosophy differs from that of Hu Jintao. The general consensus is that Xi has beefed up China’s

foreign policy. Evidence for this notion includes the fact that Xi has refrained from repeating the mantra “Hide your talents and bide your time [韬光养晦 *taoguang yanghui*] ... Get on with something [有所作为 *yousuo zuowei*].” Some also point to new regional security concepts such as the “new Asian security concept” (新亚洲安全观 *xin yazhou anquan guan*). The construction of military bases in the South China Sea offers further evidence of this trend. According to the narrative in China, this trend simply reflects China’s growing national might. Chinese foreign policy has evidently toughened, but it is not accurate to say that Xi Jinping has transformed the country’s foreign policy. In some ways, he has continued the approach of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, and some aspects of his approach are even consistent with Hu’s predecessor, Jiang Zemin.

On March 23, Xi unveiled his worldview in a speech he delivered in Moscow⁵:

The tides of the world change rapidly. If we go with the times, we will prosper; if we resist, we will perish. If we are to keep up with the times, we must not be physically present in the 21st century with our minds stuck in the past, mired in the bygone age of colonialist expansion and Cold War thinking and constrained in an obsolete zero-sum mindset. There is an objective need for a sea change in international relations, toward a paradigm where the nations of the world come together to support each other’s development. The world community must establish a “new model of international relations” [新型国际关系 *xinxing guoji guanxi*] underpinned by “win-win cooperation” [合作共赢 *hezuo gongying*], and the peoples of all nations must work together to safeguard world peace and promote common development.

In this 2013 speech, Xi first noted that the world was changing. He then asserted that the countries of the world must adapt to these changes and that the world needs a “new model of international relations” (新型国际关系 *xinxing guoji guanxi*) to meet the needs of the time. This was not in itself a new idea; Hu Jintao had already spoken of a “new model of international relations underpinned by win-win cooperation.”⁶

In time, Xi would eventually link the idea of a “new model of international relations” with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); in a speech he delivered at the 19th National Conference of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017, Xi framed the BRI as an attempt to effectuate this idea. Before he could promote this project, however, Xi first had to reassure the international community, who otherwise might fear that China, for all its talk of win-win relations, might be using the project for, if not a zero-sum victory, its own ends. To assuage this concern, Xi Jinping announced during his tour of Africa in March 2013 that China would uphold the “correct sense of justice” (正确义利观 *zheng que yi li guan*).

The concept of “correct sense of justice” was elaborated on in a *People’s Daily* newspaper article dated September 10, 2013. Authored by China’s foreign minister

Wang Yi, the article called on readers to adopt the spirit of “Comrade Xi Jinping’s important thinking on diplomatic strategy,” and, in particular, the idea of “steadfastly maintaining the “correct sense of justice” and actively embracing our role as a responsible world power.” In the article, Wang described Xi Jinping’s thinking as follows:⁷

According to Xi Jinping, “justice” [义 *yi*] reflects our credos, the principles of communists and socialist nations. In the world today, some people live comfortable lives while others do not. This is not a good situation. True wellbeing and happiness comes when everyone is well and happy. We want a world where everyone develops together. We particularly want to see developing nations achieve rapid development. As for “interests” [利 *li*], this means sticking to the principle of mutually beneficial win-win relations. Rather than one side winning and another losing, both must be winners. We are duty-bound to do all we can to assist poor nations. Sometimes, we must prioritize ethics and justice over our own interests; sometimes, we must forfeit our own interests for the sake of ethics and justice. We must never pursue our own interests alone, or think only in terms of gain and loss.

Thus, the concept of a “correct sense of justice” became a key diplomatic philosophy that would legitimize China’s efforts to promote the BRI as part of a “new model of international relations underpinned by win-win cooperation.” Without this philosophical underpinning, so the logic went, China’s neighbors might assume that the country’s growing assertiveness in the world was for the sake of its own economic interests.

On October 25, 2013, Xi delivered an address at the Conference on Diplomatic Work with Neighboring Countries (held in Beijing on October 24–25). This address included two notable statements. The first was: “We must *get up and get on* [奋发有为 *fenfa youwei*] with our diplomatic work, achieve amicable neighboring relations, cultivate the soil for our country’s growth, and implement common development with our neighbors. The second was: “We must *more actively press on* [更加积极有为 *gengjia jiji youwei*] with the task of ‘neighborhood diplomacy’ [周边外交 *zhoubian waijiao*].” The term *press on* [有为 *youwei*] stems ultimately from the maxim “Get on with something [有所作为 *you suo zuo wei*]” (as in “Hide your talents and bide your time ... Get on with something”); it meant “to achieve success in foreign policy.” In 2006, Hu Jintao had reworded the mantra as follows: “**Steadfastly continue to** hide your talents and bide your time [坚持养晦韬光 *jianchi taoguang yanghui*] ... **Actively** get on with something [积极有所作为 *jiji yousuo zuowei*].”⁸ Hu subsequently abridged “Actively get on with something” to “Actively get on [积极有为 *jiji youwei*].” In the October address, Xi further reworded the phrase as “**get up and get on**” (奋发有为 *fenfa youwei*). Thus, Xi was continuing in the broad direction of his predecessors but in his own way. Whereas the preceding regimes of Hu

Jintao and Jiang Zemin had maintained the “Hide your talents and bide your time” principle, Xi dropped this slogan; moreover, he took Hu’s slogan “actively get on” and beefed it up as “get up and get on.”⁹

Much of what Xi said at the October conference concerned the BRI (then officially translated as One Belt One Road), which had just been unveiled to the world. For example, he spoke of working together in building the “Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road” (丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路 *sichou zhi lu jinjidai he 21 shiji hai shang sichou zhi lu*) and related infrastructure. However, Xi also used his address to outline his new diplomatic philosophy, saying the following: “We shall find an amicable balance of interests, uphold the concept of ‘correct sense of justice,’ uphold principles, speak of friendly ties, speak of moral integrity, and do all we can to assist developing countries.” These words were consistent with his statements that Wang Yi had reported in the above newspaper article. Security was another key theme of Xi’s address. Xi described foreign policy as being closely tied to external security, and he described security as a key challenge in “neighborhood diplomacy.” Xi’s thinking here would eventually culminate in the “overall national security outlook” (总体国家安全观 *zongti guojia anquan guan*).¹⁰

To address the security challenge, Xi proposed an “Asian security outlook” (亚洲安全观 *yazhou anquan guan*). On May 21, 2014, Xi attended the 4th Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia Summit, where he delivered a rather pointed message about his security outlook:¹¹

Ultimately, it is up to the people of Asia to manage Asia’s affairs, solve Asia’s security problems, and ensure Asia’s security. Asia’s peoples have the ability and wisdom to cooperate with one another to achieve peace and security throughout Asia. Asia should be an open Asia. Asian countries should, on the one hand, work closer with each other. On the other hand, they should also extend the hand of cooperation to countries and regions outside Asia, as well as to international organizations. We welcome all positive and constructive contributions toward Asia’s security and cooperation, whereby we achieve “mutually beneficial” [双赢 *shuangying*] “abundantly beneficial” [多赢 *duoying*], and “collectively beneficial” [共赢 *gongying*] relationships.

[...]

China remains firmly committed to the path of peaceful development, and we always follow a win-win and outward-looking strategy. We will cooperate with countries of the world guided by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. China’s peaceful development starts right here in Asia, remains rooted in Asia, and delivers blessings to Asia.

The security outlook described in the above statement could be read as the antithesis to the US-led security paradigm. However, if we relate the statement to Xi’s

thinking on neighborhood diplomacy, it seems to indicate that China's diplomatic and security policy (particularly in relation to its Asian neighbors) is to play a more assertive role in Asia.

Although China may have become more active internationally, there was to be no change in its long-held disavowal of interfering in other states' internal affairs. In late June 2014, China invited the heads of India and Myanmar to attend a series of events to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.¹² Xi used the commemoration to reiterate that China's diplomatic principles comport with the Five Principles, including "mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs" and "mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty."¹³ At the same event, Xi emphatically rejected the notion that China seeks hegemony, and he underscored China's commitment to peaceful development. His statements were reported in a June 28 CPC news article titled "China rejects the view that a country becomes hegemonic as it grows in strength; we staunchly adhere to the path of peaceful development." Part of the article read as follows:

In his speech, Xi Jinping said that China rejects the view that a country becomes hegemonic as it grows in strength. The desire for hegemonic power or bellicose militarism is simply not in the blood of the Chinese people. We remain unwaveringly committed to the path of peaceful development, believing that this path is in the interests of China, Asia, and of the world at large. Nothing will ever shake our faith in the pursuit of peaceful development.

Xi Jinping said that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are enshrined in China's Constitution and that they are the cornerstone of China's diplomatic policies. China is a participant in, builder of, and contributor to today's international system.¹⁴

In July 2014, the Chinese government issued a white paper on foreign aid. The paper stated that China, as the world's largest developing country, should engage in "South-South cooperation" to support and assist other developing countries. This South-South cooperation, the paper explained, should focus on alleviating poverty and enhancing welfare in the least developed countries. The paper also highlighted how Chinese foreign assistance differs from the aid programs of developed countries: Chinese aid does not come with any political conditions, China does not interfere in the internal affairs of aid recipients, and China fully respects the right of recipients to pursue the path of development they choose. The guiding principles of Chinese foreign aid, it declared, are "mutual respect, equality, maintaining trust, and win-win relationships." Tellingly, these principles, as with the statements discussed above, emphasize the "correct sense of justice" and "win-win cooperation." Finally, the paper declared that China sees foreign aid as a means to promote a harmonious relationship with the international

community.¹⁵ However, limited as it is to South-South cooperation, China's foreign aid does not operate under the norms of aid organizations, such as the OECD's Development Assistance Committee.

A new diplomatic philosophy

On November 28–29, 2014, the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs convened for the first time during Xi Jinping's tenure. At the conference, Xi outlined his understanding of global trends as follows: "Today's world is changing. Many new opportunities and new challenges have emerged, and international relations and the international order are realigning. The power balance is shifting, and the world is moving in a direction more favorable to peace and development."¹⁶ In other words, from China's perspective, the international order is realigning and the power balance is shifting in China's favor. This appraisal echoes what Xi said in Moscow: "The tides of the world change rapidly. If we go with the times, we will prosper; if we resist, we will perish."

Xi also used his address at the foreign affairs conference to outline his diplomatic philosophy. He emphasized that China should carry out its own way of "big power diplomacy." China should, he asserted, draw upon its experience to develop a diplomatic approach with "distinct Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese context." Thus, when Xi had earlier in the year stated that "China is a participant in, builder of, and contributor to today's international system," he did not mean that China accepts wholesale the principles and values of the existing international order; rather, he meant that China contributes to international order through its own distinctive brand of diplomacy. In the speech, Xi further elaborated on this Chinese-style diplomacy as follows: "We shall steadfastly uphold the guiding hand of the Communist Party of China along with our system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Likewise, we shall steadfastly maintain our nation's trajectory of development together with our social system, cultural traditions, and values." According to Xi, the approach, credos, and values that China follows must be those of its own, and the guiding principle for China's foreign policy must be to promote its "independent foreign policy of peace" (独立自主的和平外交政策 *duli zizhu de heping waijiao zhengce*) and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. That is not to say, Xi added, that China should ever forego its legitimate interests or jeopardize its "core national interests" (国家核心利益 *guojia hexin liyi*). Although China would no longer "hide its talents and bide its time," it would, Xi made clear, uphold its "independent foreign policy of peace" and the Five Principles, while at the same time safeguarding its "core interests." According to Xi, this diplomatic philosophy equates with the "new model of international relations underpinned by win-win cooperation," and, as such, it emphasizes the "correct sense of justice." China's "overall national security outlook" (总体国家安全观 *zongti guojia anquan guan*) would be another

indispensable part of the strategy, Xi said. He went on to say that while maintaining the principle of non-alignment, China should develop friendships far and wide and forge a global network of “partnerships” (伙伴关系 *huoban guanxi*). The reference to China’s avowed policy of not seeking alliances (as opposed to “partnerships”) reads as a thinly veiled attack on America’s hub-based approach to international security networks.

Where does foreign aid fit into this diplomatic philosophy? Xi mentioned foreign aid in the section of his speech regarding neighborhood diplomacy. In that section, he said that China must develop and roll out its diplomatic strategy under the new paradigm. This task, Xi claimed, requires China to prioritize neighborhood diplomacy and to cultivate in its neighborhood a “community of shared future” (命运共同体 *mingyun gongtongti*). Xi then proposed several diplomatic approaches, such as expanding cooperation with major countries, integrating closer with developing countries, and promoting multilateral diplomacy. He finally mentioned foreign aid in the following remarks (underlining by author):

We should step up our efforts to promote practical cooperation, actively construct the One Belt One Road, endeavor to find areas where our interests coalesce with others so as to mutually gain, and promote practical “win-win cooperation.” We shall also put into practice the “correct sense of justice,” provide effective foreign aid, and authentically “integrate justice and shared interests” [弘义融利 *hongyi rongli*]. Finally, we shall continuously step up the capacity and level of our systems to safeguard our security.

Of note here is that Xi linked foreign aid with the slogans “win-win cooperation” and the “correct sense of justice.” These slogans had already featured in the white paper on foreign aid released in July 2014, but the phrase “integrate justice and shared interests” (弘义融利 *hongyi rongli*) was a new coinage. Soon after Xi had coined this phrase, a campaign began to promote the concept. Yu Jun (于君, director of the Center for International Affairs and Chinese Diplomacy, Chinese Academy of Governance) elaborated on the new thinking as follows:

What is justice? Justice is all about the society of Great Togetherness [大同 *datong*]. However, under the existing political and economic order, some countries grow prosperous, while others have lagged behind in development for a long time. This state of affairs is not what China desires. We have a duty and responsibility to assist those countries that have long been friendly to China but have struggled to develop.

On the other hand, Yu also emphasized that China must defend its interests abroad, adding that “foreign aid is one way for China to promote its diplomatic strategy.”¹⁷

Thus, in the early stage of his tenure, Xi indicated that he would continue some aspects of the diplomatic philosophy China had pursued up to the Hu Jintao era. At

the same time, he developed a new diplomatic philosophy for the “new model of international relations” and proposed One Belt One Road as a practical means to achieve such a model. As for China’s long-held insistence on national sovereignty and its support for the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, Xi did uphold these precepts, but he also understood that they were insufficient in themselves to reassure China’s neighbors, who might feel alarm at the fact that Xi had dropped the “keeping a low profile” rhetoric, changed the rhetoric of “press on” to the beefier “strive to achieve,” and signaled that China would play a more assertive role in Asia. It was to assuage such concerns that Xi advocated the “correct sense of justice,” claiming it would enable “win-win cooperation.” Foreign aid was to be the practical manifestation of the “correct sense of justice,” as well as an opportunity to showcase a practical way toward win-win cooperation. The phrase “with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色 *zhonguo tesse*) was a watchword in the discourse of this period, which would explain why the rhetoric that Xi used tended to emphasize Chinese traditions and approaches and omit references to Western notions of democracy and liberalism or global standards.

However, China would by no means turn its back on the international order. Xi signaled that China would play an active role in the G20 and UN. During the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015 (held on 25–29 October), Xi cited statistics illustrating how much China has contributed to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals:

For more than 60 years, China has actively engaged in international development and cooperation. During that time, it has provided 166 countries and international organizations with assistance close to 400 billion yuan and has dispatched over 600,000 aid workers, more than 700 of whom gave their lives for the sake of another country’s development.¹⁸

On September 28, 2015, Xi delivered an address at the UN.¹⁹ The year 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Mindful of this fact, Japan assumed that Xi would use the occasion to strike a friendly tone with China’s wartime allies, Britain, the USA, and Russia, as well as with the global community in general. As it turned out, Xi used the address to advertise his diplomatic philosophy to a global audience. In the speech, Xi described peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom as the common values of humankind and the goals for which the UN strives. To help achieve these goals, Xi continued, China would build a “new model of international relations founded on win-win cooperation” and establish a “community of shared future for all humankind” (人类命运共同体 *renlei mingyun gongtongti*). Xi then called on the audience to abandon “I win, you lose” winner-take-all thinking in favor of “mutually beneficial” (双赢 *shuangying*), “abundantly beneficial” (多赢 *duoying*), and “collectively beneficial” (共赢 *gongying*) relationships. In

international relations, Xi argued, countries should “seek dialogue, not confrontation” and “seek partnership, not alliance.” Major countries, he added, should follow the principles of “no conflict” (不冲突 *bu chongtu*), “no confrontation” (不对抗 *bu duikang*),²⁰ “mutual respect” (相互尊重 *xianghu zunzhong*), and “win-win cooperation.” Large countries should treat small countries as equals,” he continued, “and take a right approach to justice and interests by putting justice before interests.” Xi then called for an end to the Cold War mentality and the law of the jungle, where the weak are left at the mercy of the strong. To use military force in a heavy-handed manner, Xi warned, is to pursue military despotism, and those who take such a path will find that they are “only lifting a rock to drop it on their own feet.” Rejecting the “clash of civilizations” worldview, Xi argued that different civilizations must have dialogue and exchanges. So far in his speech, Xi had neatly summarized the diplomatic philosophy he had developed since taking office. His speech then continued as follows:

China has always been a builder of world peace, and it remains committed to peaceful development. Regardless of how the world changes or how powerful our nation grows, we will not pursue hegemony or expansionism, and we will never seek to carve a sphere of influence.

China has always contributed to global development, and it remains committed to common development and to the strategy of opening up, which is necessary to achieve mutually beneficial win-win relationships. We will share our own development experience and opportunities with other countries. We invite countries of the world to ride the tailwinds of China’s development so that we can develop together.

With these words, Xi declared that China would never pursue hegemony, outlined the “new model of international relations,” and underscored its importance. Xi then continued as follows:

China has always been a defender of international order, and it remains committed to development through cooperation. China was the first nation to sign the UN Charter. We will continue to uphold an international order and the international system underpinned by the spirit and principles of the UN Charter. We will continue to stand alongside developing countries, particularly those in Africa and to advocate for these countries to gain greater representation and voice in the system of international governance. China’s vote in the UN will always be the vote of developing countries.

Where Xi spoke of China being a defender of international order and the international system, he apparently meant being a defender of the UN. We cannot tell at this stage whether China supports any alternative international order or system to that of the UN, but Xi’s words here signal support for the UN, at least. Citing the fact that

China is a founding UN member lends further weight to this view. Xi's statements on foreign aid were similarly in keeping with the UN's agenda. For example, Xi voiced support for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals agenda, which was agreed upon at the 2015 summit and outlined in "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." Additionally, these Sustainable Development Goals became a part of the Chinese strategy for foreign aid.

In October 2015, Xi discussed global governance at the 27th conference of the CPC Central Committee's study group.²¹ In his speech, Xi outlined his take on global trends as follows: "The international power balance is undergoing seismic changes. Emerging markets and numerous developing countries are progressing rapidly, and their influence only grows greater. Never in modern times have we seen such a revolutionary shift in the international power balance." Xi then critiqued the existing paradigm that has existed since modern times. The Great Powers, he said, have sought their own ends by waging wars, colonizing territories, and carving out spheres of influence, and they have established institutions and rules to coordinate each other's relations and interests. Today, he continued, there should be a consensus among nations to establish international mechanisms, observe international rules, and pursue international justice, and countries of the world should cooperate in these matters. Accordingly, he added, there needs to be a community of shared interests. Notably, Xi highlighted the importance of the UN as follows: "The world is awash with tensions and inequalities. These problems don't suggest that the spirit and principles of the UN Charter are outdated; rather, they suggest that the spirit and principles are yet to be properly fulfilled." Xi followed this up with the following statement: "We shall steadfastly defend an international order and international system centered on the UN Charter's spirit and principles." Xi then set out the view that China helps fulfill the UN Charter by using its position as a developing country to listen to the voices of the developing world and address the world's injustices and inequalities. Finally, Xi apparently implied that Western approaches are ill suited to this task: "We shall identify the aspects of Chinese culture that offer solutions for global challenges and a way for global governance."

From the analysis so far, we can understand that during the formative stages of his regime, Xi partially upheld the diplomatic philosophy of Hu Jintao, but he also introduced new concepts. We can also understand that Xi started organizing these concepts systematically, positioning them as descriptive components of the "new model of international relations." However, this understanding is based only on what Xi and other senior government figures have said. Xi's philosophy is not without inconsistencies. China's unwillingness to compromise on its core interests, for example, runs counter to the idea of peacefully and amicably resolving territorial disputes. The rhetoric on win-win, likewise, may seem hypocritical given that China would have more to "win" than its counterparty would when it comes to negotiations over territorial disputes.

Developments in 2016

Before and after the South China Sea ruling

The year 2016 saw developments that offer crucial insight into China's relationship with the international system. On July 12 of that year, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled on the dispute between China and the Philippines over the South China Sea. Essentially, the tribunal flatly dismissed China's long-held claim to marine resources falling within the "nine-dash line" and ordered China to abide by international law. In response, China's foreign ministry claimed that the ruling was invalid, had no binding power, and that China would not accept or be bound by it. The next day, the ministry reiterated its grounds for refusing the tribunal's ruling. By reacting in this way, China was seemingly challenging the international order.

In June, the month preceding the ruling, Xi had attended the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing, where he expressed his desire to build a "new model of international relations." He described the concept as follows: "We want to strengthen cooperation with countries around the world, jointly safeguard an international order and international system centered on the UN Charter's spirit and principles, and help put the international order on a more just and rational course so that we can make the Earth we inhabit a more beautiful place."²² Judging from these remarks, China was, just before the tribunal's ruling, maintaining the same basic approach it had followed through to the end of 2015.

On June 25 (after the ruling), then US national security advisor Susan Rice met Xi in China. Ostensibly, this meeting was held to prepare for the upcoming G20 Hangzhou summit. However, the topics discussed included US-China relations and China's stance toward the international order. An official account by the Chinese foreign affairs ministry includes the following English-language account of the meeting (underlining by author):²³

Xi Jinping emphasized that China and the US should focus on enhancing mutual trust. China's development goal is to let 1.3 billion Chinese people live an abundant life. When China grows strong, it will never seek hegemony. China does not intend to challenge the current international order or rules either. The common interests shared by China and the US far outweigh their differences, and the two sides can and need to cooperate in many areas. Both China and the US should actively expand cooperation in bilateral fields such as economy, trade and investment, multilateral fields such as tackling climate change, as well as international and regional issues, so as to make practical cooperation the ballast stone of China-US relations. Both sides should effectively manage and control differences, and respect each other's core interests.

From this text, we see that Xi advocated China's "big power diplomacy" to Rice, expressing his desire for China and the US to respect each other's core interests and

find areas in which to cooperate. He also stressed, as he had in the past, that China's increasing strength does not mean that it seeks hegemony and that China does not wish to challenge the existing international order or international rules and norms. Thus, although China had just thumbed its nose at a ruling by an international body, there was to be no change in its basic stance on maintaining the existing international order.

However, a more pointed message was delivered just before the ruling. On July 6, Fu Ying (chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress Strategy) delivered a speech, titled "China and the Future of International Order," at Britain's Royal Institute of International Affairs (commonly called Chatham House).²⁴ The key remarks were as follows:

It is commonly accepted in Britain and the west that the existing world order is built and led by the US, which is also known as "Pax Americana". This order, as I see, contains three pillars: first, American or western values; second, the US led military alignment; third, the UN and its institutions. This world order has its roots in the history of international politics and also has its modern contributions. The United States, as the leader for this order system has also reaped great benefit from its leadership role.

In short, Fu was saying that the existing world order, as understood by Britain and the West, is Pax Americana—an order built and led by the US. She also said that this order has three pillars: US or Western values, US-led military alignment, and the UN and its institutions:

What you hear from the Chinese leaders is that, China is part of the international order. One need to note that the term used here is "international order" and what it refers to is the UN and its institutions, including the principles of international law. This may overlap with the aforementioned "world order" but is not exactly the same. China has a strong sense of belonging to this UN led order system, as China is one of its founders and a beneficiary, a contributor, as well as part of its reform efforts. "There is no intention to unravel the system or start all over again," quoting from the Chinese President Xi.

From this message, we can understand that when Xi speaks of international order, he means the UN and its institutions (what Fu defined as the third pillar of Pax Americana) and the principles of international law. Fu's speech was in early July; when, later in the month, Xi told Rice that China was not challenging the international order, Rice, it seems, did not push Xi to define "international order." Regardless, when Xi described China as a defender of the international order, his definition of the term was clear: He meant neither the US/West-led world order nor military alignment; he simply meant the UN, its institutions, and international law.

In January 2017, Xi addressed the UN Office at Geneva. His speech included the following remarks, which suggest continuity with the policy pursued in 2016:

China is a founding member of the UN and the first nation to sign the UN Charter. China will continue to defend an international system centered on the UN; it will continue to defend international norms underpinned by the UN Charter's spirit and principles; it will continue to defend the authority and status of the UN; it will continue to defend the UN's core role in international affairs.²⁵

In autumn 2017, Xi addressed the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. He used his address to reiterate his vision of the "new model of international relations." He also declared 2049 as the target year for achieving this vision and fulfilling the dream of China's full restoration as a nation. In this way, Xi used the grand occasion to legitimize his diplomatic philosophy (to pursue a new model of international relations), which he had proposed after taking office and subsequently consolidated. Foreign aid also featured in the speech. Xi clearly positioned aid as a means to promote the BRI and thus realize China's diplomatic philosophy:

We shall steadfastly maintain the national policy of opening up. We shall be open to the world in our efforts to pursue our basic national policy. We shall actively promote international cooperation through the BRI. We shall strive to communicate our policies and to facilitate connectivity, trade networks, capital flows, and exchanges between different peoples. In this way, we will build a new platform for international cooperation and provide a fresh driving force for growth. We shall also increase the level of assistance to developing countries, especially the least developed countries, so as to narrow the gap between North and South.²⁶

In the same year, Xi addressed a meeting of China's diplomats. Whereas Xi had used previous speeches to outline his diplomatic philosophy and urge firm adherence to the same, here, he spoke with brimming confidence about the future. In the speech, he shared his take on global trends as follows:²⁷

Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. First of all, we must fully take on board the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress and accurately understand the current trends and global forces. If you look at the world today, you will see that we stand at an epochal, once-in-a-century juncture.

Xi continued as follows:

Since the turn of the century, we have seen the rapid development of numerous emerging markets and developing countries. We have also seen the world become increasingly multi-polar. In this way, the international community is undergoing structural shifts day by day, and the momentum of this global trend is now irreversible.

Later in the speech, he said the following:

We shall coordinate the two major fronts—the domestic and international front. [...] We shall build a new model of international relations and a community of shared future for all humankind. We shall enrich our diplomatic infrastructure in all directions, forging a global network of partnerships and extending ever wider our circle of friends. Alongside this, we shall promote the BRI, cooperate closer with countries far and wide, and promote common development. Furthermore, we shall actively engage in global governance and multilateral frameworks and safeguard the common interests of the Chinese people and humankind as a whole.

Although Xi mentioned the “new model of international relations” and the BRI, he did not refer to the “correct sense of justice,” and “win-win cooperation.”

Interestingly, Xi used the speech to clearly outline his future vision. He conveyed his confidence in the future as follows:

Acting in one accord, the Communist Party of China has led the Chinese people in a tenacious struggle to become a powerful nation. The Chinese people have achieved a big jump by “getting up, getting rich, and getting strong” [从站起来、富起来到强起来 *cong zhan qilai, fu qilai dao qiang qilai*]. The Chinese people have never had such bright prospects for a great revival.

Xi expressed similar confidence in his 2018 New Year message:

Today, people have both hopes and fears for the prospects of peace and development for humankind, and they expect China to clarify its position and attitude. The world is one big family. As a responsible major power, China will announce its views as necessary: China shall continue to uphold the authority and status of the UN, fully discharge its international responsibilities and duties, observe agreements on climate change, and drive forward the BRI with our partners. We shall always remain a builder of world peace, contributor to global development, and defender of international order. The Chinese people extend the hand of cooperation to peoples of all countries and wish to work with them to forge a beautiful future with greater prosperity and greater tranquility for all humankind.²⁸

US-China tension and how it has shaped China's vision for international order and diplomatic philosophy

The year 2018 saw mounting tensions between the USA and China. This article will not discuss in depth the reasons for or background of this trend; suffice it to say, the tension forced China to temper, to a certain extent, its vision for international order

and diplomatic philosophy. Amid the rising tensions, China's diplomatic policies, not least the BRI, have come under attack, forcing the regime to respond.

In March 2018, China's premier, Li Keqiang, delivered a speech to China's legislature (the National People's Congress) listing China's policy accomplishments over the preceding five years. As part of this speech, he described the fifth accomplishment as follows: "Five: We have steadfastly maintained the basic national policy of opening up. Focusing on 'win-win cooperation,' we have significantly improved our open economy." He then highlighted how the BRI has benefitted China's economy. Li also lauded Xi's diplomatic strategy, saying "Over the past five years, we have seen all-around progress in big power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics." He then underscored Xi's diplomatic philosophy, saying "We have advocated the building of a community of shared future for all humankind, and contributed plenty of Chinese wisdom toward the transformation of the global governance system." As positive as these comments may have been, Li's speech seemed somewhat subdued compared with the pointed rhetoric against the US in 2016 or the self-confidence Xi had conveyed in autumn 2017. In outlining the prospects for 2018, Li focused on the softer components of Xi's diplomatic philosophy: China shall, he said, pursue the path of peaceful development and promote the new model of international relations, actively engage in reform efforts to refine global governance, and work to build an open global economy.²⁹

In June 2018, the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs was convened in Beijing by the Foreign Affairs Committee. Formerly known as the Foreign Affairs "Guidance Group" (领导小组 *lingdao xiaozu*), the organ had been upgraded to "committee" (委员会 *weiyuan hui*) in March that year under the Program to Strengthen the Party and Reform State Institutions (深化党和国家机构改革方案 *shenhua danghe guojia jigou gaige fangan*).³⁰ In his address to the conference, Xi repeated what he had previously said about the state of the world and what China must do (China stands at an "epochal, once-in-a-century juncture"). However, he also introduced some new ideas.³¹

First, Xi emphasized establishing the correct "view of our role" (角色观 *jiase guan*). This idea featured in the following statement: "To grasp the international situation, we must establish the correct view of history, view of the overall situation, and view of our role." Xi then explained "view of our role" as follows: "It means, simply, to calmly analyze international phenomena. It also means to position ourselves amid such phenomena, grasp how we fit into the wider world, ascertain where we stand and what we must do as the global framework shifts, and thereby objectively formulate diplomatic policies." Xi's explanation was by no means subdued in tone. Indeed, he went on to say the following: "Never in the modern era has there been a more opportune time for China's development."

Second, Xi signaled a change in thinking on big power diplomacy. In the official account, the sentiment was as follows: "We shall skillfully manage big power relations. We shall develop a framework of big power relations that is stable and balanced overall." However, an online Sina article offers some suggestions on the subtext. Xi, according to the article, had the US administration in mind when he talked of big power relations. When he talked of "managing" and making "stable" relations, he was referring to managing and stabilizing Sino-US relations. Moreover, with the reference to "balanced," Xi was implying that China should also develop relations with big powers besides the US.³²

The third idea concerned political control over foreign policy. Xi stated the following: "Foreign policy is a microcosm of the national will. It is imperative that the authority to conduct foreign affairs be vested within the Central Committee." He then conveyed that each component of the state (the CPC, the Chinese government, the National People's Congress, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the People's Liberation Army, local governments, and the people) must play its assigned role under the supervision of the CPC. On the one hand, Xi was acknowledging the fact that China's foreign policy had not previously been under the Central Committee's control. On the other hand, he was underscoring the importance of foreign policy.

In December 2018, a time of thorny diplomatic challenges for China, the country commemorated the 40th anniversary of the reform and opening up. In his address at the commemorative ceremony, Xi said the following: "China is drawing closer to the center of the world stage. Our nation is increasingly recognized as a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of international order." Xi then outlined China's foreign policy direction. For the most part, he summarized all the policies he had introduced thus far in his tenure, but he added the occasional barbed remark about Pax-Americana, such as the following: "We shall oppose the trend of imposing one's will on others, interfering in other countries' affairs; neither shall we ever sacrifice our own legitimate rights [...] China shall never ever seek hegemony, no matter how much we develop."³³

Reflecting the backdrop of US-Chinese tensions and the slew of criticism levied against the BRI, Xi's rhetoric was less audacious than it had been in 2017. However, there was to be no major change to the diplomatic strategy: China would continue to avoid direct confrontation with the US, while winning friends in the international community, particularly in the developing world, and applying leverage to major individual countries. On this approach, Xi said the following:

History tells us that if we pursue the path of confrontation, whether that be cold wars, hot wars, or trade wars, no one will be a true winner. There is no problem that cannot be resolved through dialogue, provided that countries are willing to treat each other as equals, respect each other, and compromise with each other.³⁴

Conclusion

From this analysis, we have found evidence that Xi Jinping's regime has continued the approach of the Hu Jintao era, as well as evidence that he has changed it.

First, China has projected its long-held victim consciousness onto the wider world. It has painted the US-led world order as flawed, posited this view as the consensus of the developing world, and assumed the role of spearheading efforts to rectify the international order. This narrative rests on the assumption that China represents an alternative to the Western Powers of the modern era. What we must remember, however, is that China maintains its victim mentality—or the narrative of restoring China's sovereignty—and this thinking reflects the country's unwillingness to ever compromise its "core interests." All this rhetoric is consistent with that of the Hu Jintao era, but Xi has made it more emphatic.

Second, China has maintained its "traditional" diplomatic philosophy. This is a key aspect of China's "independent foreign policy" and its advocacy of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. China has linked these principles with its avowed policy of shunning "alliances" with other countries and opposing interference in other countries' internal affairs. The country intends to uphold this policy, with some exceptions (such as "constructive interventions"). To compare this stance with that of the previous regime, while Hu Jintao touted the slogan "[Steadfastly continue to] hide your talents and bide your time ... [Proactively] get on with something," Xi dropped the first part of this message and reworded the latter part as "strive to achieve" to signal that China would make a more proactive effort to achieve diplomatic success.

Third, China is not a developed country; it continues to engage with the world as a developing one. This third point overlaps with the first one. In this respect, China has maintained the course of the Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin regimes. But the very fact that China remains a developing country means that it must pursue win-win cooperation in its BRI and other projects, whether that takes the form of aid or investment. As a developing country, China must seek its interests, but not in a zero-sum manner; the gains must be shared. The "correct sense of justice" encapsulates the thinking that gains must be allotted equitably.

Fourth, China believes that the tide is in its favor. As China sees it, global trends have come to an epochal, once-in-a-century juncture, and the power balance is in flux. Amid this shift, the country sees itself as gaining an edge and being on the cusp of taking center stage in international politics. This global outlook differs markedly from that held following the Tiananmen Square event. China was already leaning toward this outlook in the Hu Jintao era, but the country has embraced it much more emphatically under Xi Jinping. Despite the rising US-China tensions in 2018, this outlook remains largely intact.

Fifth, under this global vision, Xi Jinping has proposed, as China's diplomatic philosophy, a "new model of international relations" that Hu Jintao had only mentioned and hadn't used as a philosophy. This concept, along with the "new Asian security concept," did not feature as important words as philosophy in the Hu Jintao era. Underpinned by "win-win cooperation" and, by extension, the "correct sense of justice," this new model describes international interactions that are mediated by interests, and it envisages these interactions forming a "circle of friends" and, ultimately, a "community of shared future for all humankind." Absent from this model are any references to democracy and liberty. China has posited the BRI as a platform to put the model into practice. Similarly, aid has been posited as the concrete manifestation of the principle of win-win cooperation underpinned by the "correct sense of justice."

The policies that represent the above outlook and diplomatic principles are likely to be modified according to circumstances. Examples of this fact include Xi's declaration about China's view of its role and his change in thinking on big power diplomacy. Moreover, the policies themselves are more complex and nuanced than the rhetoric may suggest.

On the other hand, China's worldview and diplomatic philosophy has some underlying contradictions. The first issue is that China's uncompromising stance on its core interests runs counter to the principle of mutual non-interference. China has many territorial disputes with its neighbors. To these neighbors, China's insistence on mutual non-intervention seems hypocritical given that China is occupying its claimed territories and building military installations on them. The same contradiction applies to China's economic strategy. Insofar as international relations are to be mediated by interests, countries are never all going to get an equitable share. Hence, some countries will prioritize their economic relationship with China, while others will not. It is not hard to see, then, how a country's economic relationship with China will likely become an internal political issue. China's principle of mutual non-interference is therefore problematic. There is also an issue with the "correct sense of justice" as it fails to resonate with other countries. The more China repeats the Chinese buzzword "justice," the more it needs to clarify its meaning.

Another issue is that as China grows more powerful, its narrative of being the voice of the developing world starts to ring hollow. When China talks of pursuing economic development while acting as the leader of the developing world, it means that its GDP per capita is to reach above \$10,000. However, once China reaches this milestone, it will forfeit its underlying philosophy of promoting interest-mediated relations and win-win relationships. Alternatively, the fact that China's economic clout is already at an impressive level can itself feed into the sense that interests are being unfairly allotted. A similar problem exists in the "new model of international relations." There is scant expository discourse on the

power China would wield in such a paradigm, and although the country has given some hints in its actual political and military conduct, the statements from the Chinese leadership are threadbare.

Other concepts have also been under-explained. What, for instance, does Xi mean when he speaks of coordinating the two major fronts—the domestic and international fronts? Does he simply mean integrating or consolidating different state organs, or could the statement imply that China must additionally address internal criticisms (such as those levied against the BRI)? Again, the more Xi deploys Chinese buzzwords (such as this or that “with Chinese characteristics”) in his attempts to communicate China’s diplomatic philosophy and vision for world order, the more his global audience will require clarification. The “correct sense of justice” may resonate with a Chinese audience, but can the same be said for China’s neighbors or African countries? If China really wants to challenge Western ideas, it must do a better job of clarifying and being accountable for its message. Otherwise, China’s dream of a “new model of international relations” will amount to nothing beyond China’s own interpretation.

Remarks

This article is a translated and modified version of the following Japanese article, publication forthcoming: Kawashima, S., “Shū Kinpei Seiken Ka no Gaikō / Sekai Chitsujokan to Enjo: Ko Kintō Seiken Ki to no Hikaku wo Fumaete [Xi Jinping’s Diplomatic Philosophy and Vision for International Order: Continuity and Change from the Hu Jintao Era],” in Kawashima, S., Endo, M., Takahara, A., Matsuda, Y. [eds.] *Chūgoku no Sekai Tenkai to Sono Sobō [China’s Global Development and the Outlook Thereof]*, Showado.

Notes

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