

2016

What Kind of International Order Does China Want? Between Reformism and Revisionism

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APA Citation

Cabestan, J. (2016). What Kind of International Order Does China Want? Between Reformism and Revisionism. *China Perspectives* (2), 3-6. Retrieved from https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/hkbu_staff_publication/6151

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Editorial

JEAN-PIERRE CABESTAN

What kind of world order does China want? Having become the world's second largest economy in 2010, China clearly has ambitions to change the international order. The coming to power of Xi Jinping in late 2012 confirmed this ambition, although most observers of Chinese foreign policy point to 2008, with the global financial crisis and the Beijing Olympic Games, as the year of Beijing's de facto abandonment of the policy of prudence and of keeping a low-profile (literally "fleeing the light and seeking the darkness" – *taoguang yanghui*) promoted by Deng Xiaoping after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989.⁽¹⁾ The meeting on China's new diplomacy organised by Xi in November 2014 openly replaced this motto with a formula much more in phase with the country's new power and capabilities: "Strive for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*), an expression that can also be translated as "deploy all your energy" or "be dynamic and full of promise."⁽²⁾ In any case, the People's Republic of China (PRC) intends from now on to not merely assert its power but also to become a source of initiatives on the international stage. In other words, to use one of Mao Zedong's favourite expressions, China wants to "walk on two legs," and both legs, as we shall see, are more complementary than contradictory: to put it simply, one could say that one represents the stick, and the other the carrot.

To theorists of international relations, China's power assertiveness and the rapid strengthening of its military capabilities demonstrate beyond any doubt that the Beijing leadership as well as large segments of Chinese society continue to favour a realistic approach to relations between nation-states, especially with the other great powers, and above all with the United States. The impressive popularity of John Mearsheimer's book⁽³⁾ in China is one of the most striking illustrations of this. On the other hand, to supporters of the constructivist approach, the integration of the PRC into the world economy, its active participation in intergovernmental institutions, the growth of its societal relationships with foreign countries, and the increasing visibility of its "soft power" attest to the merits of their analysis and to the need for China not only to accept a higher degree of interdependence with the international community, but also to take greater advantage of this interdependence in order to defend and promote its national interests.⁽⁴⁾

Obviously, we will not manage in this dossier and in this presentation to reconcile these two schools. China, like the other major powers, does not completely assume these two essential aspects of its international action: it is in this sense somewhat schizophrenic or "autistic," as Edward Luttwak puts it.⁽⁵⁾ One could go further and argue that this schizophrenia is the expression of an authoritarian political system that is more "fragmented" than is commonly believed, torn between quasi-independent baronies equipped with the institutional or rather the bureaucratic resources to defend their interests and their patch tooth and nail. Such is the division between administrative systems (*xitong*) in China that everything relies on the capacity of the regime's top man, the "Secretary General-President-Commander-in-Chief," in other words Xi Jinping, to coordinate and to tell the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the whole country which priorities to follow. In this sense, the centralisation of power in his hands meets the institutional and policy needs of the People's Republic while it aims to reach the first division of great powers, on an equal footing (at least for now) with the US.

This duopoly that does not speak its name is also a new form of bipolar rivalry, reminiscent in some ways of the high tide of the Cold War and of US-Soviet tensions. However, times have changed: China has not only strengthened but also globalised, and combining well-tempered realism with selective constructivism allows it to now take advantage of the new asymmetries that have emerged and that are generally, except vis-à-vis the United States, advantageous to it, in order for it to not only carry more weight in international relations but also to more clearly influence the rules of the international game.⁽⁶⁾ But even with regard to the US, the Beijing regime knows how to guard against finding itself in a position of weakness: this is the well-known "hedging" strategy, used by many countries in the context of the post-Cold War and of globalisation, including the United States against China, but it is far more vital for any lesser power in its relationship with a stronger state.⁽⁷⁾

The question is obviously whether China is willing to settle for reforming existing standards and international institutions or whether it wishes to "change everything." In short, as Françoise Nicolas asks in the first article, is it reformist or revisionist? One should bear in mind that the PRC, due to its internal regime but probably also to its strategic tradition, tends to mask its true intentions. For example, who could have foreseen, even five years ago, the establishment in 2015 of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and especially its success? Likewise, what is Beijing's long-term goal in the South China Sea? To oust all the other countries that occupy natural structures there, or to dominate through its sheer relative weight the area inside the famous nine-dash line, inherited from the eleven-dash line drawn by Chiang Kai-shek's regime in 1947?

At the same time, as shown by the contributions in this issue, there is also a sense that the Chinese government has decided to "walk on two legs": to put it simply, on the one hand, to reform from within, by means of its growing influence, existing norms and institutions; and on the other, to create new standards and institutions designed to compete with, but also to challenge and transform from outside, the international order established by the United States and the West at the end of World War II. In other words, China is both reformist and revisionist.⁽⁸⁾

1. *Taoguang yanghui* is sometimes translated as "conceal one's capacities." Cf. the writer's *La politique internationale de la Chine. Entre intégration et volonté de puissance* (China's international policy: Between integration and will to power), 2nd edition, updated and expanded, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015, pp. 106-115.
2. Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2014, pp. 153-184.
3. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 2003.
4. Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, New York, Longman, 2001.
5. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, Cambridge & London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 13-23.
6. For a useful discussion of the concept of asymmetry, cf. Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006; and Brantly Womack, *China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia*, New Jersey, World Scientific, 2010.
7. Brock F. Tessman, "System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April 2012, p. 205.
8. Richard Fontaine and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "How China Sees World Order," *The National Interest*, May-June 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-sees-world-order-15846> (all URLs accessed on 12 May 2016).

While there seems to be a strong consensus among the official Chinese elites (politicians and public intellectuals) around this hybrid project, we perceive durable fault lines both as regards China's long-term international objectives and the modus operandi it should favour.

Indeed, beyond this capacity of transformation of the international order, what is the objective of the People's Republic? To take the place of the United States? Everyone agrees that China will sooner or later become the world's leading economic power, even if the current slowdown in growth may extend this timescale. Many Chinese also think, not without reason, that their country will eventually manage to dominate East Asia, challenging the privileged strategic role occupied by the Americans since 1945. But does China really believe it can completely oust the United States from its regional environment? And how many Chinese actually expect that their country will replace the US as the world's leading military and political power? While the realist theory of "power transition" between the dominant but declining power that is America and the rising power that is the former Middle Kingdom has many followers in the People's Republic, one wonders if this issue does not divide the Chinese more than it unites them.⁽⁹⁾

The evolution of the distribution of powers (the power shift referred to, for example, by Gaye Christoffersen) does not necessarily equate with a transition similar to the passing of the torch between the United Kingdom and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, officially, Xi's China continues to call for "multipolarity" (*duojihua*) in international relations, without always being aware of the capacity of the other poles, even the secondary ones, to counter its own rise to power. In addition, with Washington, Beijing has maintained a strategy of avoidance – or delay – of any direct confrontation, promoting a "new type of relationship between major powers" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*).⁽¹⁰⁾

However, the debate over China's ambitions and which policies to favour is far from over. The recent controversy between Wu Jianmin, former ambassador to France and former dean of the University of Diplomacy, and Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao*), highlights the strong disagreements within the Chinese elite: while Wu defends the virtues of diplomacy and continues to believe in promoting "friendly" relations with Western countries and China's neighbours, and denounces Hu's "narrow nationalism" (*xia'ai de minzuzhuyi*), the latter claims greater freedom of speech to assert his nationalism and endorse the legitimacy of resorting to war, especially in the South China Sea – if not against the United States, then at least against the Philippines.⁽¹¹⁾ But the comments of Wu, who has clearly become more moderate since he retired, suggest a critique of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, which he considers to be too aggressive, a source of unnecessary tensions, and ultimately contrary to the country's long-term interests. And shouldn't we interpret the recent official criticism of the *Global Times* as an attempt by the current authorities to address Wu's concerns and adjust, at least up to a point?⁽¹²⁾

The four papers presented in this special feature do not directly reflect these tensions. But they show how the current projects of China and its President are freighted with ambiguity. Indeed, as indicated by Françoise Nicolas in the first article, the PRC is highly critical of the liberal international economic order dominated by the US and Western countries; but at the same time it has taken full advantage of this order to develop and emerge to the forefront. In particular, it has enjoyed the largesse of the World Bank, accepted the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and especially sought, logically enough, and succeeded, as its economy expanded, in increasing its representation there. Similarly, in 2015,

although still largely non-convertible, the *yuan* became the fifth international reserve currency, a move that is primarily symbolic because the special drawing rights (SDRs) are little used (at least for the moment). China has also made very skilful use of the WTO rules, at the risk of abusing them, in order to better protect its companies and its market.

However, China's growing power now allows it to demand more and to begin to achieve some of its objectives: among them, the questioning and initially the weakening of Western, and especially American, domination of the world economic order. The creation of the New Development Bank, the bank of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in 2014, and of the AIIB in 2015, are part of this project. In the latter case, it is striking to observe how China seeks to gain the same privileges as the United States, which it nonetheless denounces in the case of the IMF (the US maintains a 17.4% share – and veto power – as against China's 6.4% after reform). In the AIIB, China (with a 26% share) holds a minority blocking vote, that is to say a *de facto* veto, in any major governance decision. In this sense, China is a revisionist power, but in this case more by imitation of the United States than by the establishment of a new system of governance. Washington and Tokyo have since sought to counter or reduce the effects of this initiative by offering cooperation on projects with the World Bank, and with the Asian Development Bank, where they respectively continue to exert a major influence. However, it is clear that, while increasing its influence within existing institutions, China has the will to create its own institutions, in which it intends to play a decisive role. In other words, it is doubtful that China would have given up its AIIB project even if it had achieved a stronger representation in the IMF before the end of 2015.

In the field of energy governance, as Gaye Christoffersen shows in the second article, China also walks on two legs, and probably even more. On the one hand, it questions the liberal order and refuses to join the International Energy Agency (IEA), which is dominated by the developed countries and especially the United States. On the other, it seeks to establish a new energy order with the help of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), two entities over which it can claim to have a major influence. However, this enterprise does not seem promising or realistic. As a result, Beijing is trying to integrate these projects into its new Silk Road initiative (*yidai*

9. Yan Xuetong, *Shijie quanli de zhuanqi: zhengzhi lingdao yu zhanlue jingzheng* (The transition of world power: Political leadership and strategic competition), Beijing, Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2015. Cf. also his interview in *The New York Times*: Yufan Huang, "Q. and A.: Yan Xuetong Urges China to Adopt a More Assertive Foreign Policy," 9 February 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/world/asia/china-foreign-policy-yan-xuetong.html.

10. Michael Swaine, "Xi Jinping's Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: Assessing and Advancing Major-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 46, March 2015.

11. Wu Jianmin, "Zhunqie renshi jintian de shijie" (Knowing today's world correctly), *Zhengzhixue yu guoji guanxi luntan* (Tribune of political science and international relations), 2 April 2016, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NDMzMzNTk2MA%3D%3D&mid=412066191&idx=4&sn=3cf0a163591e5ed25e4bd99b025acc0c&scene=1; Wu Jianmin, "Waijiaojia Wu Jianmin: xia'ai de minzuzhuyi hai ren hai ji" (According to diplomat Wu Jianmin, narrow nationalism is dangerous), *Caixin.com*, 18 April 2016, <http://culture.caixin.com/2016-04-18/100933594.html>; the critique of Wu Jianmin by Hu Xijin: Hu Xijin, "Dui Wu Jianmin gongkai piping Huanqiu shibao de huiying" (Answer to Wu Jianmin's open criticism of *Global Times*), post on Weibo, 7 April 2016, www.weibo.com/huxijin?is_hot=1#_rmd1461728480898; "Dove vs. Hawk: Standoff between Chinese Diplomat and Global Times' Chief Editor," *People's Daily on line*, 8 April 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/04/08/c90000-9041485.html#.Vwb59vqg0BM.twitter>; "War of Words Erupts between Chinese Ex-Ambassador and Editor of Nationalist Tabloid," *South China Morning Post*, 7 April 2016, www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1934247/war-words-erupts-between-chinese-ex-ambassador-and?utm_source=The+Sinocism+China+Newsletter&utm_campaign=30463850c9Sinocism04_07_164_7_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_171f237867-30463850c9-24564721&mc_cid=30463850c9&mc_eid=565b43662a.

12. "Chinese Newspaper Global Times Blasted over Editorial on Donald Trump and Poll on Unifying Taiwan by Force," *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 2016, www.scmp.com/news/china/politics-politics/article/1944459/chinese-newspaper-global-times-blasted-over-editorial.

yilu) and especially its "land corridor" component (*yidai*), while also developing a dialogue with the IEA and Washington, knowing full well that only these institutions and bilateral negotiations will contribute to reducing the global governance deficit in the energy sector. There is obviously an important security dimension in the Silk Road strategy: that of reducing its dependence on the Malacca Strait and delivering more oil overland, at the risk of having to rely on others, such as Pakistan, to improve the security of particularly volatile regions such as Baluchistan. It is a question for Beijing of building a new China-centred energy order, not autonomous but integrated into the global energy governance system.

In the domain of the Internet, we can see a similar deficit of international institutionalisation. Séverine Arsène points out in the third article that, as China sees it, the establishment of a new world order in this area involves better control of the Internet by sovereign states and their stronger participation in the elaboration of international rules related to it. China is not short of allies in this endeavour: all authoritarian or even sovereignist states, such as China's quasi ally Russia, favour a clearer and more effective cyber-sovereignty. As in other areas, including international financial institutions, China takes deft advantage of mistakes made by the West, such as deregulation, and of scandals, such as the Snowden affair, to advance its pawns and justify the censorship and filtering it applies to the Web.

Certainly, Chinese experts have a strong tendency to present the question of Internet governance in a paranoid manner, as if China were the only one constantly besieged by cyber-attacks, and also as if, unlike the US, it were not attacking anyone. Its aim is clearly to justify the restraints it imposes on access to sites and feeds. However, what is most striking is Beijing's ability to make full use of the institutions of the UN system in order to highlight its concerns and to legitimise them in front of the international community. In fact, the UN and the International Union of Telecommunications in particular are the most likely to give China the majority support it seeks. As Séverine Arsène shows, China is striving to obtain endorsement of a flexible international law for the Internet, suitable for every national and cultural context and protective of national sovereignty. In other words, in China's view, the regulation of the Internet involves an affirmation and strengthening of the sovereignty of each state and inter-state agreements, rather than the establishment of multi-stakeholder institutions. Even if it were reformed, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) is likely to remain suspect in the eyes of the Chinese authorities as being outside their sovereign control and in contradiction to any regionalisation of the Internet. Will China achieve its objectives? As I see it, the question remains open.

In matters of international public law and the law of the sea in particular, China demonstrates the same selective approach as in many other areas. As Sébastien Colin shows in a current affairs article, it applies those rules that serve its interests and ignores the rest. But how does this make it different from the US or other major powers, such as India? One can point out that, unlike Washington, Beijing ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1996. But in contrast to the US administration, which claims to apply it in reality, the Chinese government has expressed reservations, particularly in matters of international arbitration of maritime disputes, and has advanced interpretations that not only place it in a minority position, but, by considerably extending its sovereign control over the exclusive economic zones it claims, make it a recalcitrant and uncooperative member of the international community in this field.

Finally, what do we learn from these contributions about the foreign policy of Xi Jinping and that of his successors?

The first conclusion is clear: by various means, such as "entryism" and circumvention, which is to say, an approach that is sometimes reformist and sometimes revisionist, China seeks to change the current international order. To achieve its goals, it uses many resources at its disposal: first, its economic and financial power, then its diplomatic influence, and finally its military and naval power in the broad sense, including navy, coast guard, and fishing boats. The Silk Road initiative, whose objectives are economic, diplomatic, and geostrategic, is part of this mobilisation capacity. China also exploits all the international organisations to which it belongs, first and foremost the United Nations, an organisation whose role, for obvious reasons – the presence of a majority of non- or only partly democratic states – China wishes to see expanded (as does Russia), but also those organisations in which it has a clear predominance, such as the SCO and the BRICS group.

Moreover, China is no longer afraid of multilateralism and feels strong enough now to play this card even in bodies where it must struggle with the West, such as the G20, the WTO, or the OECD, the organisation of rich and democratic countries that it refuses to join but with which it maintains a sustained dialogue, for example with regard to development aid. One could add to this development the evolving Chinese approach to climate change, marked by the agreement signed with President Obama in Beijing in November 2014 and the Paris Agreement of December 2015. For the first time, China has made clear commitments to the international community.⁽¹³⁾

Nevertheless, despite a cautious easing of its position (for example, its role with the US and others as mediator in the endless crisis of South Sudan), the People's Republic remains largely favourable to a Westphalian international order and therefore anxious to preserve almost absolute state sovereignty. This principle is not unrelated to its internal security needs, and to the survival of the single party regime that presides over what is the world's second great power. In this sense, Beijing needs to continue fuelling its propaganda as well as its international action with a good dose of anti-Americanism and even anti-Westernism. Does this necessarily mean that the current Chinese regime seeks to establish a new China-centred international order, as Feiling Wang (quoted by Gaye Christoffersen) and others believe?

One can doubt it. Confucianism, the concept of *Tianxia* (Empire World) and of tributary states attached to it, the travels of Admiral Zheng He, now renamed the greatest "pacifist" explorer in history, and even the Legalist (*fajia*) renewal are all ideological resources pressed into the service of both the domestic and international strategies of the PRC. But one cannot imagine China being capable of extending to the whole world the *Tianxia* it once imposed on East Asia, which even then was not without long periods of interruption, weakness, and withdrawal. It is enough to observe the evolution of Japan, India, or even of the Koreans or Indonesia to measure the limits of Beijing's ability to recreate a world that is both Westphalian and China-centred.

This reality points up two major weaknesses of the PRC: on the one hand, its inability to fully open up to the world, and the consequences that this paranoia, which is probably partly justified, can have on its ability to innovate and become a fully developed and modernised economy and society;

13. Anthony H. F. Li, "Hopes of Limiting Global Warming? China and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change," *China Perspectives*, No. 2016/1, pp. 49-54.

and on the other hand, the weakness of its soft power, still too often perceived as an attribute of the state rather than of society. In this sense, as noted by David Shambaugh in 2013, China is an incomplete great power.⁽¹⁴⁾ Accordingly, while it has managed to more clearly influence existing institutions and has begun to create new ones (such as the SCO and the AIIB), it still has only a relatively limited capacity to issue international standards and to take part in global governance.

Is this relative weakness, to which we must add the significant slowdown of the Chinese economy, a source of stability and peace, or rather of instability or even war? Some analysts, such as Jonathan Holslag, already foresee an armed conflict between China and Asia.⁽¹⁵⁾ Although in the light of tensions in the South China Sea one cannot completely exclude this hypothesis, in times of difficulty the Beijing regime has rarely, and probably never, opted for external adventures. Furthermore, such a decision would run counter to its own strategy, which consists precisely of advancing on tiptoe, feigning reformism but actually implementing a revisionist project that does not

speak its name, and placing its *Go* stones one after another on the world board (or *Goban*) in order to remake it more in its own image.

Will China succeed in this endeavour? As this dossier clearly shows, the outcome of the game does not depend on China alone: it will also be the result of the foreign and defence policies of its main partners and neighbours. While they are rather constructivist and eager to bring China into the international community, they retain, like the United States and Japan, a healthy dose of realism that can readily be put in motion if necessary.

■ Translated by Michael Black.

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14. David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

15. Jonathan Holslag, *China's Coming War with Asia*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.