

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **China as a Selective Revisionist Power in the International Order**

*Report of a seminar presentation by Bonnie Glaser at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in January 2019, compiled by Khairulanwar Zaini\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The Trump Administration has identified China as a revisionist power in its National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy. However, it is important to assess whether China fits the traditional descriptions of a ‘revisionist’ power.
- China and the West have different understandings of the international order, particularly as it relates to the status of the U.S global alliance system and the role of values and norms.
- China seeks to change the international order both through the creation of parallel institutions as well as the pursuit of change within existing institutions.
- China is best understood as a *selective revisionist power*: While it accepts the notion of an international order and a rules-based system, it does not accept all the existing rules in the current system, especially those that they it regards as underwriting US hegemony.
- In general, China has accepted and become integrated into the global economic order, it has implemented some changes in the global financial order, but remains skeptical about aspects of the global political order. China also prefers incremental change in the international order, not sudden global shifts that could harm political and economic stability.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are increasing concerns about the ramifications of China's rise as a global power on the existing international order, with some fearing that China would undermine or even seek to upend the post-war order that has proven conducive to the growth of the United States and its allies. The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy identified China as one of the revisionist powers "actively competing against the United States and our allies and partners" and seeking "to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values".<sup>1</sup> The NSS describes how the competition manifests "across political, economic, and military arenas", while noting the use of "technology and information" by U.S. strategic rivals "to accelerate these contests in order to shift regional balances of power in their favor".<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the NSS elaborates that

China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.<sup>3</sup>

The National Defense Strategy, issued around a month after the NSS, similarly specifies that China wants

... to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.<sup>4</sup>

The categorical and powerful accusations against China contained in these signature U.S. strategic policy documents deserve to be scrutinized and unpacked. To properly understand China's role in and impact on the international order, it is important to assess whether China fits the traditional descriptions of a 'revisionist' power, as well as to broach beyond the rhetoric to evaluate the actions and policies that China has actually pursued. A full accounting of Chinese foreign policy would suggest that it is best understood as a *selective* revisionist power: China accepts the notion of an international order and a rules-based system—it does not seek anarchy or chaos—but while they support the idea of having rules, they do not accept all the existing rules in the current system.

## THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The idea of an international order is not as straightforward as some may assume. The Chinese differ from their Western counterparts in their understandings of the international order. In the Western perspective, the international order consists of three layers. The first is an institutional layer populated by organizations that were established in the aftermath of the Second World War, which includes the United Nations (UN), the Bretton Wood Sisters (i.e. the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), as well as more recent plurilateral institutions such as the Group of Twenty (G20). Significantly for the West, supplementing this institutional layer is a second layer comprising the U.S. system of global alliances. There is also a third layer—of values and norms. Although these values and norms may not be universally shared, they are considered inextricable from the international order in the eyes of the United States and many Western countries.

However, when the Chinese speak of the international order, they do not embrace the expansive definition of the West. Rather, China distinguishes between the UN-centric order based on sovereignty and the U.S.-dominated liberal order focused on human rights and U.S. alliance structures, and emphasizes its acceptance of only the institutional layer of the UN and its affiliate organizations. China rejects the Western contention that the American alliance system, as well as its values and norms, are part of the international order. The veteran Chinese diplomat, Madame Fu Ying, neatly encapsulated China's position in her 2017 speech, stating that:

The international order which China attaches itself to is the framework centered on the United Nations and its institutions ... the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. [The creation of this order] represented historical progress for humanity, by incorporating international relations into a framework of rules and putting world finance, trade, and development under universally recognized rules of governance.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to recognize that the international order is composed of economic, political, and security sub-orders. Change in the international order can thus be effected by a change in a specific sub-order, which could occur while the other sub-orders remains relatively stable and unchanged. Briefly put, China is most effectively integrated into the international economic sub-order, but it is within the international security and political sub-orders that Chinese concerns and reservations arise, which leads to Chinese efforts to push for change.

There are various ways to effect change in the international order., one of which is through the use military force. This is however, not a tool that China relies on today. Instead, China seeks to change the international order through the creation of parallel institutions as well as through the pursuit of change within existing institutions.

## **CHINA'S RHETORIC ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

Two statements by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2014 and 2017 in particular have caught the attention of American policymakers, setting off alarm bells over the extent of Chinese ambitions in the international order.

In one of the earliest indications of China's growing assertiveness, President Xi Jinping proposed a new regional security architecture during the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014, suggesting that

It's for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.<sup>6</sup>

This statement provoked a great deal of consternation among Obama administration officials, who sought clarification from their Chinese counterparts, since the formulation of 'Asia for Asia' was clearly intended to exclude the United States as a central player in the

affairs of the continent. The Obama administration eventually came to the conclusion that Xi's comments were meant as a trial balloon—a way of testing the region's receptiveness to Chinese efforts to curate a new security order in Asia which was not anchored by an American security presence. Moreover, other participants of CICA, such as South Korea, expressed their deep reservations about the remarks, prompting it to be dropped from the subsequent joint conference statement. On its part, China has yet to repeat such remarks or raise such a proposal again, to date.

More recently, President Xi's speech promoting the 'Chinese model' during the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017 raised similar concerns in the Trump administration. In his speech, Xi described how China's system of socialism offers "Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to the problems facing mankind". Furthermore, Xi stated that the Chinese model provides

... a new option for nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.<sup>7</sup>

For many observers, this seemed to indicate an unprecedented and remarkable shift in the tone of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, which had hitherto been non-ideological. Prior to this, even Chinese officials were keen to emphasize how the competition between the United States and China was unlike the global ideological clash that characterized the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, the idea of a 'Chinese model' seems to suggest that China is advancing an ideological alternative to capitalism. Some have suggested that Xi's speech was intended to reassure a domestic audience about the achievement and durability of Chinese economic development. Indeed, in a speech to foreign political parties in December 2017, a few weeks after his remarks at the Party Congress, Xi stated that China does not intend to export its model to the world.<sup>8</sup> However, it still remains unclear and difficult to determine China's intentions.<sup>9</sup>

- *Xi's evolving statements on China's role in the international order*

Furthermore, there has been an evolution in Xi's rhetoric about China's role in the international order, especially as it pertains to reforming the global governance system. In the same December 2017 speech to foreign political parties, Xi stated that

China will *actively take part* in reforming and constructing the global governance system, and ensuring the world political and economic order develops in a more just and reasonable direction.

A few months later, in a speech to the CPC's Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in June 2018, he pronounced that

[China] should take an active part in *leading* (引领) the reform of the global governance system, and build a more complete network of global partnerships.<sup>10</sup>

The language about China's role in reforming global governance has shifted, with Xi using the term 引领 to indicate how China should be taking an active role in *leading* efforts to reform the international system, instead of merely actively taking part in the reform process.

- *The gap between China's internal and external messaging*

There is also some mismatch between China's messages to its domestic and international audiences. Foreign Minister Wang Yi has sought to allay fears of Chinese revisionism with statements intended to reassure the world that "China will always be a participant in the international order, not a challenger; a facilitator, not a trouble-maker; and a contributor, not a "free-rider".<sup>11</sup> Wang also promised that China

... will continue to act as a responsible major country to contribute to world peace, promote global development, and uphold the international order.<sup>12</sup>

However, in its domestic messaging, China tends to emphasize its role in reworking the current international order and global governance system. For example, in a February 2018 article written for the CPC's primary journal for political theory, State Councillor Yang Jiechi argued that

The trends of global multi-polarity, economic globalization, informatization of society, and cultural diversity are surging forward and emerging markets and numerous developing countries are rising rapidly, thus driving a rebalancing of global power and gradually reshaping the theory and practice of modern international relations. Therefore, *strengthening global governance and reforming the global governance system are an imperative and general trend.*<sup>13</sup>

Yang further stated that "China will deepen its involvement in global governance and work to guide the reform of the international order". However, sentiments from figures such as Yang should also be contextualized against the internal deliberations of the Chinese leadership and foreign policy circles about the extent of global responsibilities that China should shoulder.

## **CHINESE ACTIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

- *China in the South China Sea*

Beyond rhetoric, it is also important to examine China's foreign policy actions. Beijing's conduct in the South China Sea is illustrative of what it is trying to achieve with respect to international maritime law. The rejection of the 2016 arbitration ruling by the United Nations Conventional on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal suggests an effort by the Chinese to carve out an exception in how UNCLOS should be implemented, at least in the South China Sea. China differs from the United States and other Western countries in its interpretations on certain provisions of UNCLOS, especially as it pertains to the conduct of military activities in Exclusive Economic Zones and whether foreign military ships have to seek permission to enter into a country's territorial waters. China is however not unique in

holding these perspectives on UNCLOS, which may encourage China to corral other countries to support its views on UNCLOS in the near future.

The negotiations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (CoC) also merit mention. China has reportedly proposed two provisions to the code which would prohibit cooperation with energy companies from countries outside the region as well as the holding of joint military exercises with countries from outside the region.<sup>14</sup> The first provision would not only curb the autonomy of countries in the region to pursue their own energy extraction policy, but would also provide the Chinese—as the only party to the CoC with deep-drilling technology and expertise—with an effective monopoly over any exploitation of natural resources in the region. The second provision would bar any military exercises with foreign power unless all CoC signatories have given their consent, thus providing China with a veto on all exercises in the region. Although it is unlikely that such provisions would garner support from the other ASEAN countries, it is revealing of China’s intention and efforts to curtail U.S. military presence in the region.

- *China and international norms*

In the realm of values and norms, China has also consistently opposed certain norms that have gained popular currency among Western countries, such as “the responsibility to protect”, which they view as legitimizing foreign intervention. The Chinese are also ambivalent about efforts to further democracy promotion and freedom of information in the fear that foreign countries will use these tools to undermine the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They are primarily concerned about the prospect of such norms being applied not only to other countries, but also being directed against China.

China has also been active in creating new rules and norms, especially within the framework of existing institutions such as the United Nations. China, along with Russia, has been at the forefront of a concerted effort within the UN to define cyber-sovereignty as a right which justifies a country’s control over content within its borders and state censorship of the Internet. Moreover, China has prioritized the role for states to craft the rules for the newly-emerging field of cyber-governance, emphasizing the importance of state sovereignty and territoriality in the digital space, and rejecting the inclusion of civil society groups in the UN Group of Governmental Experts. China also pushed for references to “multi-stakeholders” to be replaced with “multilateral” and the deletion of “freedom of expression” and “democratic” in its submission of a revised International Code of Conduct for Information Security in 2015.

In the UN Human Rights Council, China has also promoted orthodox interpretations of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs which weaken international norms of human rights, transparency, and accountability. This is a departure from the Hu Jintao era, when discussion about finding a universalist conception of human rights was encouraged. However, under Xi Jinping, the approach has been instead to develop a ‘socialist’ definition of human rights. The withdrawal of the United States from the Human Rights Council has also allowed China to propagate its views without any strong pushback.

- *Chinese and parallel institutions*

China has also engaged in attempts at revisionism through the creation and development of parallel institutions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which emerged out of the Shanghai Five grouping of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, has been expanded to include countries such as Iran. So far, however, the organization has mostly focused on addressing issues and concerns of its members, such as counter-extremism efforts and economic development. It seems unlikely that the SCO will have much potential to challenge or displace the existing security architecture of the region.

China has also developed global financial institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB has proven to be a good contribution to global governance, working effectively in tandem with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Indeed, the AIIB may have evolved to be operating in ways that differ from China's original plan. When it was first proposed, the AIIB was greeted with concern and skepticism by the Obama administration. One primary reason for AIIB's positive evolution lies in the participation of many Western countries, which allowed them to influence the operations of the bank from the inside and ensure that the AIIB adopt the kind of rules that major international financial institutions adhere to.

- *China's Belt and Road Initiative*

Much international attention has been directed towards Xi Jinping's signature project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Currently, it seems that all of China's external economic activities—including those in the Arctic, Africa, and Latin America—are being subsumed under the BRI. It is no longer limited to the six corridors that comprised the "One Belt, One Road" plan in the aftermath of Xi Jinping's announcement of the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013. It is however a mistake to see the BRI as a coherent grand strategy that is being executed in the same way all over the world. Although the programme has evolved since its inception, it bears recalling that one of the early drivers for the BRI was Beijing's desire to redirect its excess domestic capacity for absorption outside China. Nevertheless, there is an increasing element of strategy as China has sought to deploy BRI projects in a way to increase beneficiary countries' economic dependence on China as a means of gaining political leverage. Moreover, the BRI enables the Chinese to subtly establish new standards for foreign investments which depart from Western conventions.

## **CHINA'S SELECTIVE REVISIONISM**

In sum, it is important to recognize that, at least at present, Beijing does not oppose the entirety of the post-war international order—it is *selectively revisionist* regarding what it views as unjust elements of the order and U.S. hegemony. In accepting the concept of a rules-based order, China however remains dissatisfied with certain elements of the international order, although it does recognize the benefits that it have derived from the order during the post-Cold War period. In general, China has accepted and become

integrated into the global economic order, it has implemented some changes in the global financial order, and it remains skeptical about aspects of the global political order.

Furthermore, although China is selectively writing new rules and developing new norms, it prefers incremental change in the international order, not sudden global shifts that could harm political and economic stability. China establishes parallel institutions when it perceives that current institutions are not working to its advantage. In the years ahead, we can expect that China will demand more of a say in shaping the international order as a condition for its support, while proactively seeking ways to lead reform of global governance.

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<sup>1</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, January 2018

<sup>5</sup> Speech delivered in her capacity as Chairperson of the 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress (NPC) Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 June 2017.

<sup>6</sup> "New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation", Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, 21 May 2014,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/yzxhxzyxrcshydscfh/t1159951.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/yzxhxzyxrcshydscfh/t1159951.shtml)

<sup>7</sup> Speech delivered during the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017, [http://www.bjreview.com/Nation/201710/t20171023\\_800107996.html](http://www.bjreview.com/Nation/201710/t20171023_800107996.html)

<sup>8</sup> Speech delivered during the opening ceremony of the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, 1 December 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-12/01/content\\_35161658.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-12/01/content_35161658.htm)

<sup>9</sup> See also "Is China proselytising its path to success?" by Bonnie Glaser, 11 January 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/11/is-china-proselytising-its-path-to-success/>

<sup>10</sup> "Xi says China must lead way in reform of global governance", *Channel NewsAsia*, 23 June 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/xi-says-china-must-lead-way-in-reform-of-global-governance-10462634><https://www.todayonline.com/china/asia/xi-jinpings-marathon-speech-five-takeaways>

<sup>11</sup> "China's Role in the Global and Regional Order: Participant, Facilitator and Contributor", Speech at the luncheon of the Fourth World Peace Forum, 27 June 2015, <http://id.china-embassy.org/eng/jrzg/t1277090.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Speech at the Opening of Symposium on International Developments and China's Diplomacy in 2017, 10 December 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cebe/eng/mhs/t1518130.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Yang Jiechi, "The 19th CPC National Congress and China's Major Country Diplomacy in the New Era", English Edition of *QiuShi Journal* January-March 2018, Vol. 10, No. 1, Issue No. 34, [http://english.qstheory.cn/2018-02/11/c\\_1122395899.htm](http://english.qstheory.cn/2018-02/11/c_1122395899.htm)

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Thayer, “A Closer Look at the ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct”, *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/a-closer-look-at-the-asean-china-single-draft-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>

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