



**ORDER** from **CHAOS**  
Foreign Policy in a Troubled World

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# How Xi Jinping Sees the World...and Why

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## ABOUT THE ORDER FROM CHAOS PROJECT

In the two decades following the end of the Cold War, the world experienced an era characterized by declining war and rising prosperity. The absence of serious geopolitical competition created opportunities for increased interdependence and global cooperation. In recent years, however, several and possibly fundamental challenges to that new order have arisen—the collapse of order and the descent into violence in the Middle East; the Russian challenge to the European security order; and increasing geopolitical tensions in Asia being among the foremost of these. At this pivotal juncture, U.S. leadership is critical, and the task ahead is urgent and complex. The next U.S. president will need to adapt and protect the liberal international order as a means of continuing to provide stability and prosperity; develop a strategy that encourages cooperation not competition among willing powers; and, if necessary, contain or constrain actors seeking to undermine those goals.

In response to these changing global dynamics, the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings has established the Order from Chaos Project. With incisive analysis, new strategies, and innovative policies, the Foreign Policy Program and its scholars have embarked on a two-year project with three core purposes:

- To analyze the dynamics in the international system that are creating stresses, challenges, and a breakdown of order.
- To define U.S. interests in this new era and develop specific strategies for promoting a revitalized rules-based, liberal international order.
- To provide policy recommendations on how to develop the necessary tools of statecraft (military, economic, diplomatic, and social) and how to redesign the architecture of the international order.

The Order from Chaos Project strives to engage and influence the policy debate as the United States moves toward the 2016 election and as the next president takes office.

# How Xi Jinping Sees the World...and Why

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Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China has gone through a series of phases marked by sharply differing conceptions of what its leaders believe the international order should look like. These changing views reflect an underlying ambivalence toward the existing order, which has played out differently in different times. China is presently going through a new phase, whose meaning can be understood more fully if we first understand how China's leaders got to where they are today in their thinking about the global order. Reflecting on both the continuity and the changes of these last seven decades will allow us to distinguish better what is genuinely new and different from what is familiar.

There is a temptation to see changes in a country's trajectory as reflecting the vision of the country's leader, in this case China's President Xi Jinping. Xi has already demonstrated that he is a decisive leader, stronger than his predecessor and determined not only to manage China but to transform it to meet huge unsolved challenges, primarily at home but also abroad. But in thinking about the potential impact of China's leader on a country of nearly 1.4 billion people, it is sometimes useful to recall that, in 1972 when President Nixon said to Chairman Mao that "the Chairman has changed the world," Mao famously replied, "No, I have just changed a few things on the outskirts of Beijing." Mao's modesty on that occasion was excessive, and to be sure he and to a lesser extent Xi have changed China's course. But his comment reminds us that large national transformations are more often the product of historical forces than the writ of one powerful leader. Understanding how Chinese views of international order since 1949 have evolved should help to clarify, not obscure, Xi Jinping's particular contributions to the way China sees and wishes to interact with the world.

From Mao Zedong's assumption of power in 1949 .... Beijing regarded the international order as illegitimate, representing the triumph of the strong over the weak, of the imperialists and colonialists over their victims....

### **Mao Zedong – Hostility toward the International System**

From Mao Zedong's assumption of power in 1949 until Deng Xiaoping put China on a different course in the 1970's, China was essentially a revolutionary power, not only in its domestic policies but in its attitude toward the international order. Beijing regarded the international order as illegitimate, representing the triumph of the strong over the weak, of the imperialists and colonialists over their victims, of the rich over the poor, of the developed over the undeveloped, of the capitalist over the socialist, and of the white over the non-white. In none of these views was the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party unique. This viewpoint was widely shared among the countries of the Nonaligned Movement, and had found powerful international expression at the Bandung Conference in 1954. These views underlay a Chinese rejection of the international order and actions and calls for its replacement by a more "democratic" international system.

These perspectives came naturally to a Communist Party steeped in Marxist-Leninist ideology. They also reflected the legacy of the Chinese experience during the so-called "century of humiliation" (1840s-1940s) of occupation and invasion by outside powers. And they were reinforced by a post-1949 U.S.-imposed isolation of China and exclusion of it from the international community.

This meant that all of the major multilateral and plurilateral international institutions were under attack by Beijing. Beijing was long interested in joining the United Nations, but was blocked by the United States. But as for other U.N. organizations, it seemingly had no interest, and even after joining the U.N. in 1971, it made no rapid movement to join these other bodies that it had long denounced as pillars of an unjust international order. Thus, by its own choice and that of the West led by the United States, China was excluded from all of the organs of the United Nations system—the U.N., the World Bank, the IMF, the GATT, and the U.N.'s specialized agencies. Taipei represented China as the "Republic of China" (ROC) in most of them, and since Beijing refused to join any organization that recognized the government in Taipei, there was no question of China joining any without replacing the ROC.

Besides the U.N. system, Beijing reserved particular ire for the U.S.-dominated organizations and arrangements that it viewed as similarly hostile.

NATO, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and other U.S. security alliances and related basing arrangements around the world were seen as designed to project American hegemony and intimidate Third World countries like China. Beijing rejected the global nonproliferation regime as a tool of the superpowers, joined the nuclear weapon nations' ranks in 1964 in defiance of the Test-Ban Treaty, and declined subsequently to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which it condemned. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD was seen as a rich countries' club setting ground rules designed to preserve capitalist rule, in response to which China supported calls for a New World Economic Order. The Western media were seen not as free institutions but rather as tools of Western domination, and China supported Nonaligned Movement calls for creation of a New International Information Order that would break the Western media monopoly.

At the height of this revolutionary period, China actively supported insurgent movements in many Southeast Asian countries, fought alongside North Korea in its war against South Korea and the United States, and provided support for revolutionary movements in far-flung parts of the world, notably in Africa. These struggles were characterized by Beijing as “wars of national liberation,” meaning that they sought to replace pro-Western, “neo-imperialist” governments with socialist regimes. But China kept itself at arm's length from the main organizations articulating the anti-colonialist ideology, the Nonaligned Movement and the Group of 77, during this revolutionary phase. Rather it adopted a kind of splendid isolation, associating itself with the general policy lines of these two organizations while maintaining a free hand. This isolation was consistent with Mao's larger objective, which was to keep the world at bay. Mao's China was weak, a desperately poor country having emerged from decades of war and occupation and a century of international humiliation. While pursuing sporadically high-risk foreign initiatives, Mao mostly wanted China to be left alone to undergo a revolutionary transformation without outside interference.

### **Deng Xiaoping – Joining the International System**

With China's opening to the United States, beginning in 1972 at the time of President Nixon's visit and accelerating much more dramatically after

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U.S.-China normalization of relations in 1978, Beijing substantially rethought its approach to the international system.

Deng Xiaoping initiated a domestic strategy of economic reform and opening to the outside world, especially the United States and the West. Such a strategy required foreign investment, foreign trade, foreign knowledge and technology, and foreign cooperation. With a change in attitude toward the United States came changes in Beijing's attitude toward the entire international order that the United States dominated.

During the years of Deng Xiaoping's rule, China joined or started on the road toward joining all of the key organizations in the U.N. system that it had once denounced—not only the U.N., but the World Bank, the IMF, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and International Atomic Energy Agency, various other nonproliferation organizations aiming at suppressing development of weapons of mass destruction, the GATT/WTO, and the U.N.'s specialized agencies. It ceased to condemn NATO, which it saw as a useful balance against the Soviet Union, and it *de facto* accepted as benign the U.S. array of security treaties (except for the U.S.-Republic of China defense treaty) in the western Pacific. It also joined an assortment of plurilateral Asia Pacific organizations, including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods were eventful, coinciding with and indeed facilitating China's emergence on the world stage as a major player based on the spectacular economic growth over which they presided. But neither leader articulated a vision of China that fundamentally altered what they had inherited from Deng Xiaoping. The ideological slogans that each stood for—Jiang's "Three Represents" and Hu's "harmonious society"—had little or no relevance to China's place in the world, which continued to be seen in the terms articulated by Deng. Both Jiang and Hu were consensus leaders in periods of collective leadership. Neither was in a strong position to lay out a new foreign policy vision, even if they had been so inclined.

During the Deng period, and on into the time of Jiang Zemin's and Hu Jintao's presidencies (1992 to 2012), China generally conveyed a sense of comfort with the international order that it had joined, and Chinese officials and intellectuals rejected the notion that China was a "revisionist" power.

China's behavior in the international organizations generally reflected that view, as China participated constructively in them, sometimes to the frustration of the United States on specific issues but generally not in an obstructionist or destructive fashion.

All the while as China shed the role of revolutionary power and declined to become a revisionist power, it nonetheless continued to have an ambiguous attitude toward the international order. It derived benefits from it, and participated constructively in it, but years of revolutionary indoctrination and sympathy for Nonaligned Movement theology left more than a residue of ideological identification with the international system's critics. Even as China became a pillar of the international system, it continued to join other Third World voices in calling for a more "democratic" international order, New International Information and Economic Orders, constraints on the veto power of U.N. Security Council permanent members, and abandonment of "Cold War" institutions like the U.S.-led alliances which were seen as legacies of history. There was a disconnect between China's actions, which were those of a supporter of the international system, and its rhetoric and stated convictions, which still voiced the grievances of those excluded from the system's benefits.

### The Xi Jinping Era – New Capabilities

This is the historical backdrop against which we should see the innovations that Xi Jinping, as China's leader since 2012, has brought to bear in thinking about the international order. China's dominant conceptions during the period from 1949 until 1978 and then from 1978 till 2012 were not pure intellectual creations by disinterested scholars. They reflected both the ideology and the strategic priorities of the Chinese leadership. They also were the product of a leadership that was not only revolutionary but weak internationally, without the hard power to project their ideas and interests effectively.

The new ideas of the Xi era reflect massive changes in China's place in the international system, its economic, political, and military strength, and China's expectation that the international system would and should accommodate this transformed China.

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The China that Xi Jinping inherited was vastly different from the China that his three predecessors encountered when they assumed office.

The China that Xi Jinping took over was the second largest economy of the world, having gone through two decades of near double-digit growth. It was the world's largest trading country. An export powerhouse, it had accumulated several trillion dollars in foreign exchange reserves (by 2015 about \$4 trillion). It was the biggest target of foreign direct investment outside the United States, and the fastest growing source of outward direct investment. It was the largest scale manufacturing country in the world, and the center of a regional manufacturing hub linking the countries of the western Pacific. It was the largest trading partner of every country in southeast and south Asia. China's appetite for raw materials drove global commodity prices, first sharply up, then down. It was the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases.

China's military was the product of two decades of double-digit budgetary growth. It had modernized its nuclear and ICBM force into a more capable second-strike force, and developed MRBM and cruise missile systems that began to alter the military balance in the region with the United States. It had developed a massive fleet of Chinese Coast Guard vessels that could patrol the South and East China Seas. It was developing a fleet of modern diesel-powered submarines enabling it both to project power and to threaten surface vessels in the western Pacific. It deployed its first aircraft carrier. Its fighter aircraft inventory expanded to the point where it felt able to declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, with hints of one in the South China Sea to follow. The dramatic transformation of the PLA in the last two decades has inevitably raised questions among its neighbors, and Americans, about the purposes of the new PLA, whether it will be deployed for offensive objectives as well as defensive requirements, and whether China's ambitions will increase with its new military capacities.

### The Xi Jinping Era – Altered Ideas

It is important to appreciate these developments to understand how and why Xi Jinping has put forward new ideas about the international order

and China's relationship to it. China is now a much bigger player. It has different needs from the international system from the China of twenty years ago. It has vastly greater potential to affect events around it. It would have been surprising if a China so far removed from the country of decades earlier in fact did not rethink its role in the international system. Under Xi, China's leadership has done so.

Deng Xiaoping had understood that China's rise inevitably would arouse unease among its neighbors. He saw the neighbors as potential sources of investment, expertise, and trade, all of which would dissipate if China's neighbors were hostile. Accordingly, the watchword of China's foreign policy under his stewardship was "*tao guang yang hui*," which translates roughly as, "develop capabilities while keeping a low profile." This meant that China did not seek to play a leadership role regionally or globally, nor did it seek to dominate international institutions. The validity of "*tao guang yang hui*" was reaffirmed as recently as 2010 by State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who then oversaw China's foreign policy establishment.

Regardless of Deng's axiom, Chinese leaders and intellectuals had long resented their junior status in the international order, joining and being subject to the rules of organizations that China had played no role in shaping. At the same time, some in the West complained that China was behaving as a "free rider" in international organizations, deriving the benefits of membership without making significant contributions to their operations. In the international economic organizations that require monetary contributions from members with derivative voting shares, China's contributions and rights were those of a low-middle income country, based on outdated GDP figures. There was thus a developing consensus, inside and outside China, that China should play a much larger role in the international system as a rule-writer and operator.

Supplementing China's desire to play a larger role in the international system was the economic challenge of how to invest the trillions of dollars in foreign exchange it had accrued in the last two decades. Beijing resisted the urging of Western leaders to sharply and rapidly upwardly revalue its currency, and was slow in dismantling structural obstacles to greater balance, so its surplus has continued to grow. Opportunities for return on investment in the low interest rate environment of recent years have been

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inadequate. China could not continue its massive investment in U.S. Treasury instruments of the years before 2008 without accepting low returns, which added to the need to rethink China's outward investment strategy.

Xi Jinping was an opportune figure to rethink China's approach to foreign policy presented by its new capacities. His father had been one of the giants of the Communist revolution and the first three decades of Communist rule, a comrade in arms of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Xi Jinping grew up enjoying the privileges of a Communist Party "princeling" and a consequent expedited road to success and power. But he, like his father, suffered the hardships imposed by the Cultural Revolution—exile from Beijing, lengthy interruption of his education, work in the countryside. When the Cultural Revolution ended, leading to the reform period ushered in by Deng Xiaoping, his career path included senior governing positions in China's more international-minded and economically progressive areas, notably Fujian and Zhejiang provinces and Shanghai. He emerged from the experiences of privilege and suffering with a firm faith in the necessity of a strong Communist Party to govern China, an aversion to chaos and social instability, a commitment to China's economic growth based on acceptance of the role of markets, and demand for respect for China internationally.

### Challenges at home

Xi confronts a situation at home that demands attention, reform, and in his view tightened political control; and a situation abroad presenting opportunities for expansion of Chinese influence, but serious risks as well.

Despite China's spectacular economic growth in the last several decades, its leadership seems more preoccupied with strengthening mechanisms of control than it has been arguably since the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989. The array of domestic challenges posed by rapid but unbalanced growth is daunting: providing employment, housing, transportation, and medical services for 10 to 12 million new migrants moving to cities each year; developing energy sources to fuel the world's fastest growing large economy; coping with a demographic challenge that is dramatically reducing the number of able-bodied workers; growing inequality and corruption; providing for an aging population; reversing deg-

radation of the world's most polluted air and water; and maintaining peace and stability in restive minority areas, to name a few.

Xi has articulated a broad vision for China in response to these challenges, primarily domestic but also foreign, calling for fulfillment of “the Chinese Dream.” As developed in speeches and Party interpretations, the Chinese Dream means a national renaissance, building a nation of prosperity, ethnic harmony, and strength and influence internationally. It harkens back to Chinese national goals laid out by 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers at the time of national weakness and humiliation, the building of a “strong and prosperous China,” though now the idea is being advanced at a time of national success, not failure.

More specifically, Xi has chosen to confront his domestic challenges with a determination to undertake market-oriented reforms that change the export and investment-driven model that underlay China's growth before, but whose relevance is diminishing. The policies laid out in the Third Communist Party Plenum of 2013 *inter alia* aim to make the market the “decisive” factor in the operation of the economy, rebalance toward domestic and consumption-led growth, attack the problems of overcapacity and industrial redundancy, impose commercial disciplines on the state-owned sector, and attack the sources of China's suffocating pollution.

To deal with the massive disruptions that the economic reform program will bring, on top of the array of existing problems, Xi has strengthened the role of the Communist Party as a tool of governance in an authoritarian but market-dominated system. This has entailed a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign against senior and lower level Party cadres, drafts and new laws on national security, combatting terrorism, and limiting the role of foreign non-government organizations, all of which have strengthened the hand of security agencies. Controls on the media have been tightened. Ideological education has stressed the central role of the Party, the unacceptability of Western constitutional and political systems and theory, and threats to China's stability posed by pluralism and outside agitators. Pressures, including firings and imprisonment, have increased on lawyers, academics, writers, journalists, and domestic NGOs who have strayed from Party-led ideological orthodoxy.

China under Xi remains firmly embedded in the major institutions of the international system.

Just as China's foreign policy under Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Hu was highly conditioned by domestic policy objectives, it is important to understand these domestic priorities as the backdrop for the directional shifts Xi has undertaken in China's foreign policy.

### **Xi's Foreign Policy – Commitment to the International System....**

What we have seen so far in the three years since Xi assumed the role of general secretary of the Communist Party is a hybrid approach to the global system, its institutions and its norms. It is a mix of the ideas of the early period of Communist rule, when resentment and a sense of grievance against the West produced a profoundly revisionist ideology; the Deng Xiaoping era of interdependence with the outside world and growing adherence to international institutions and norms; and the new period of greater capacity and confidence allowing China to selectively stand outside the established international order or to establish new competing institutions.

China under Xi remains firmly embedded in the major institutions of the international system:

- The United Nations, as the largest contributor of the P-5 to U.N. peacekeeping operations;
- The World Trade Organization, as a frequent utilizer and target of dispute settlement cases;
- The World Bank, as the third largest contributor and largest recipient of loans;
- The International Atomic Energy Agency, as a member of the team that negotiated a freeze on Iran's nuclear weapons program;
- The IMF, whose reserve currency (Special Drawing Rights) China is on track to join; and
- The United Nation's other specialized agencies.

In terms of adherence to the norms of the existing international system, China's recent record, though mixed, contains some noteworthy positive indicators.

China continues to be one of the world's magnets of investment. It is the world's second largest trading country. China and Chinese companies have earned this status not by being outliers, but by providing an economic environment in which the leading companies in the world feel they can operate profitably and successfully. Most of the world's largest companies have interlocking relationships with Chinese counterparts, often in the form of joint ventures. Chinese leaders ritualistically speak of the importance of "win-win solutions" and their belief that "we" (China and the United States) are in the same boat. Whatever the shortcomings in respect for these principles in particular cases, the Chinese regular invocation of them shows a China that understands self-reliance is not an option.

In the security realm, China has generally respected the U.N. Charter's prohibitions against use of force and noninterference in the sovereign affairs of other states, arguably as well as or better than other great powers. It has voted for and adhered to U.N. Security Council resolutions sending peacekeeping forces to troubled areas and imposing sanctions on international lawbreakers. In addition to being the largest troop contributor to U.N. peacekeeping among the Permanent 5 members, it has offered 8,000 troops for a standby force. The Chinese government supports the nonproliferation prohibitions on nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It cooperates with the United States and other countries in opposing terrorism and piracy on the high seas.

### **Xi's Foreign Policy – Change and Hedging**

But what has captured the world's attention has been not so much the continuity and elements of the past in Xi's foreign policy, but the innovations and new directions.

Working outward from its neighborhood, China under Xi has been strengthening its political, economic, and military position in East and Central Asia, its traditional area of primary strategic concern. In Northeast Asia, Xi has built a warm relationship with South Korea's President Park Gun-hye, while keeping its traditional ally North Korea at arm's length. He has presided over a tougher posture toward Japan, allowing military and paramilitary challenges to Japan's control over the waters surrounding the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu

islands in the East China Sea and noticeably chilling the relationship with Japan. In Southeast Asia, he has reinforced Chinese claims in the South China Sea, authorizing land reclamation projects to build artificial islands that potentially could project military force that other littoral states cannot match. Under his leadership the PLA navy's presence in both the East and South China Sea has become more visible, more durable, and more threatening to China's neighbors. While giving lip service to negotiation of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, in fact China has shown little interest in a serious negotiation or in clarifying its maritime rights, seemingly believing that ambiguity about its claims better preserves its long-term options. In another demonstration of boldness, Xi became the first PRC president to meet with his Taiwan counterpart, doing so in Singapore in November 2015.

In the economic sphere, China had become the top trade and investment partner of all the countries of East Asia before Xi came to power. His administration, however, has consolidated China's position as the dominant actor in the region's economy by establishing the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), backed by \$50 billion in Chinese capital. AIIB aims to fund transportation and energy projects throughout Asia, challenging the roles hitherto played by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. China's drawing power was dramatically signaled by the decision of some 56 countries to join it as founding members of the AIIB, well beyond anything anyone, including China's leaders, envisioned.

In Central Asia, Xi has built upon important developments in the Jiang and Hu eras but has done much more than that. Under Jiang, China helped Putin found the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a security grouping aimed at combatting terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and separatism emanating from the Asian states of the former Soviet Union. Under Hu, Beijing moved aggressively to sign large deals with Central Asian states to explore for oil and gas to transport to China, and to supplant Russia as the largest trade and investment partner of most of the region's states. Xi has gone further. He has announced a modern version of the ancient Silk Road, the so-called "One Belt One Road" strategy designed largely to fund projects from China's west through Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe. The funding levels of One Belt One Road remain murky but they are expected to be very substantial, in the tens of billions of dollars.

## Asia for the Asians?

These manifestations of Chinese regional strength have triggered a spirited debate outside of China over whether China is seeking dominance in the western Pacific, the supplanting of the United States as the preeminent actor, and the kind of hegemonic presence that it has long denounced in others.

Advocates of the view that China seeks regional dominance point to Xi's speech to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA) in which he said, "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia...The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation." This language has been interpreted, over-interpreted in my view, as a statement of Xi's desire to throw the United States out of Asia and destroy U.S. regional alliances.

In fact, Chinese officials have not either repeated or highlighted this language. Chinese senior officials have "clarified" it virtually out of existence. The remarks were made in an address to an obscure conference of Asian leaders, and contextualized by other remarks about the need for Asia to be open to the world and welcome the "positive and constructive cooperation" on security of countries from other parts of the world. A two-sentence throwaway in an anodyne speech to fellow Asians does not herald a Xi Monroe doctrine for Asia.

Others with similar perspectives point to imperial China's system of tributary states as the foundation of Chinese diplomacy, even in the modern age. Through this prism, China, the "Middle Kingdom," can never treat other countries in the region as equals, only as states beseeching China's favor or protection.

Actually, the tributary state model is more complicated than one of an all-powerful China surrounded by subservient states. For a start, important countries such as Japan, India, and Indonesia never were part of the Sino-centric tributary system. Attempts by Chinese emperors to impose the ceremonies and protocols of tributary relationships on distant countries, such as England and the United States, ran into insuperable hurdles in the modern age. Globalization, the emergence of norms of international relations



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deriving from the Westphalia system of state sovereignty, China's "century of humiliation" beginning with the Opium War, and the rise of other powers in Asia have meant that the tributary system has become more a feature of history text books than of modern international relations.

That said, Chinese perceptions of their strategic interests generally have focused on the regions covered by the tributary system and other neighbors. Belief in great power spheres of influence, with China's lying in East and South-east Asia, is a common underpinning of much Chinese thinking and writing about international affairs. It has been moderated to a degree by China's growing interests in far-flung parts of the world as trade and investment partners, but Chinese strategists still tend to see their security and other interests intensely wrapped up in their neighborhood. With this in mind it is no surprise that maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas and military strategies aimed at neutralizing American superiority in the western Pacific are a preoccupation of Chinese political and military leaders and thinkers.

This way of thinking is not a creation of Xi Jinping. It is a product of historical memory, intensified by foreign invasions since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century coming from China's maritime periphery.

### **The Balance Sheet – Globally, and Regionally**

China's rise has rightfully been drawing attention since long before Xi Jinping assumed office. But questions about whether China is a threat to the international system, a revisionist power, and a would-be regional hegemon have become much sharper in the three years since he assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. How valid are such concerns?

Xi is certainly a more forceful, assertive, and ambitious leader than his predecessor. He has behind him a China with greater capacity—economic and military—than any of his predecessors. China's regional and global footprint is considerably larger than before, and this has made countries near and far anxious.

But it would be a mistake, in my view, to view the evolution of China in the last few years primarily as the product of the vision and imagination of an

aggressive leader. Most of the actions and trends that worry observers have been present for some time: the military build-up, the assertive behavior in the South and East China Sea, the growing gravitational pull of China's economy, and the political repression and denial of basic rights to its citizens. There are questions that deserve attention about how Xi is steering China. But the larger questions about China's direction both pre-date and will post-date Xi's tenure.

China is likely to continue, whether under Xi or his successor, to follow a zig-zag path in its attitude toward the international system similar to the one described in this paper. It will further develop its relationship with the international system and interdependence with other countries, but at the same selectively adhere to international norms where they fit its interests and ignore or seek to change them where they do not. For example, Chinese economic success is firmly anchored in its relationship with other markets. Autarky and self-reliance are not feasible alternatives. China benefits from international rules and norms not only in the trade and investment area, but in the security realm as well. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and uncontrolled ethnic and civil strife in Central and Western Asia would be damaging to China's interests.

But China remains hostile or indifferent to some international norms. The most obvious one is human rights, where China has declared its nominal acceptance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but has acted contrary to its strictures in numerous ways. Its approach to maritime issues in the South China Sea is supported by claims and behavior contrary to the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China maintains ambiguity about the basis of its assertions of sovereignty and declines to bring them explicitly into compliance with the Law of the Sea because it believes a clear commitment to UNCLOS would undercut its maritime and related claims. China has not adopted standards conditioning its overseas aid and investment along the lines of the OECD countries, making such activities rife with corruption, lack of transparency, and environmental destructiveness. China's extensive reliance on "industrial policy" to favor domestic sectors and brands has been supported by rampant theft of intellectual property and forced technology transfer imposed on foreign investors. China has been an aggressive abuser of cyber technology, hacking into foreign private, government, and especially corporate targets and keeping

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corporate boards and CEOs up at night as they encounter actual and potential attacks on their core operations.

The most important indicator of China's commitment to the international system will be its attitude toward use of force. That is the norm that China's neighbors care most about. So far, it has been circumspect in this regard. The principal areas of risk are over areas China considers its sovereign territory but which others dispute: Taiwan, islands in the South China Sea, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. If China were to use force in any of these cases, it would argue that it is not violating the U.N. Charter or international law, but its neighbors would not accept that rationale. That, arguably more than the degree of its adherence to other international norms, will be the critical test of whether Xi Jinping's China is a revisionist power.

Overt use of force would be the most decisive challenge to the international system, but the more likely scenario, and the one preoccupying regional actors, is coercion that falls short of that. China's rising economic power is creating ties of dependence between China and its neighbors. Most of China's neighbors worry that these ties will bind them more than they will China, and will give China increased leverage over them. China's increasing political and military strength only adds to this unease. The question is not so much whether this trend is avoidable; it likely is not. Rather it is whether China uses its increased leverage benignly or malevolently, and whether its neighbors react primarily by accommodation or resistance.

So the verdict on whether China will be a revisionist power globally in the near future would seem most likely on balance to be no. But the answer in the Western Pacific could well be different. The regional question to be resolved is less whether China is committed to international norms than how will it behave towards its neighbors as its power expands. As China's capacities have expanded, its goals have not changed substantially, but its determination to achieve them has, and its assertiveness to do so in the face of cautionary signals from abroad has as well. The international norm of peaceful resolution of disputes will be one measure, but not the only measure by which China's rise is judged in the region. Neither China's leaders nor its neighbors know the answer to this question, but all seem to be hedging their bets.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JEFFREY BADER** is a Brookings Senior Fellow affiliated with the John L. Thornton China Center. He was the first Director of the China Center, and was John C. Whitehead Senior Fellow in International Diplomacy from 2012 to 2015. He served in the U.S. government for 30 years in various capacities mostly dealing with U.S.-China relations, including as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs from 2009-2011.



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