

China's Assertive Foreign Policy and Global Visions Under Xi Jinping

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Abstract: China, which has made a major economic breakthrough, has become one of the most important actors in international politics by increasing its military power in recent years. China's increasing power and influence in the international arena arouses increasing curiosity about the country's foreign policy. With Xi Jinping becoming president, China began to display a more assertive attitude or behavior on many issues. This study basically seeks an answer to the question of what differences Xi Jinping brought to Chinese foreign policy. What kind of changes do these differences lead to in Chinese foreign policy? In this study, the general tendencies and directions of Chinese foreign policy during the Xi Jinping period are discussed. The assertive foreign policy approach that Xi Jinping is trying to implement is analyzed. In this context, the visions of "Chinese dream", "new type of great power relations", "new type of international relations", "Belt and Road Initiative" and "a community with a common future for humanity", which reflect Xi's assertive foreign policy approach, are examined. At the same time, challenges to the assertive foreign policy implemented under Xi Jinping are discussed. The study mainly questions the extent to which Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy approach is successful. The study concludes that Xi Jinping's active foreign policy approach has not increased China's sphere of influence in the international arena to the extent expected. As China becomes more visible in the international arena, the country's foreign policy challenges seem to be increasing.

Keywords: Xi Jinping, Chinese Foreign Policy, Assertive Foreign Policy, New Global Visions

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, China has integrated with the global economy and has shown a great economic development. By the second decade of the 21st century, it became the world's largest economy in some economic measurements. In addition to its economic development, it also showed great military development. The increase in its material power also increases the uncertainty about Chinese foreign policy. It is wondered which direction China will take in foreign policy in the future.

The change in Chinese foreign policy has become more visible with Xi Jinping administration. Unlike previous leaders, President Xi has taken more active and self-confident initiatives in foreign policy. The Xi administration began to pursue an assertive foreign policy that did not shy away from showcasing China's growing power. Under Xi, China has taken ambitious initiatives to reshape its immediate neighbourhood and the international environment. However, during the Xi administration, there was also a noticeable increase in the challenges China faced in foreign policy. The increase in the number of countries wary of China's growing material power is one of these challenges.

This study seeks to answer the question of how China's foreign policy stance has changed under Xi Jinping. What are the foreign policy orientations and goals of China's new administration? How do China's new orientations affect the country's foreign relations? This study first analyses the general

trends and orientations of Chinese foreign policy under the Xi Jinping presidency. New trends and orientations in China's foreign policy are analyzed in the context of social constructivism. Constructivism offers a nuanced perspective for understanding and explaining Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping.

This study consists of three main parts: Firstly, the conceptualisation of assertive foreign policy is examined. Policies and discourses reflecting assertive foreign policy will be emphasised. Assertive foreign policy visions and initiatives will be discussed. Finally, the challenges faced by the Xi Jinping administration in foreign policy will be discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping state behavior. It provides valuable insights into the ideational factors shaping Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, highlighting the role of cultural identity, norms, and diplomatic initiatives in shaping China's approach to international affairs.

Constructivists think the structures in international politics consist of social relations as well as the distribution of material capabilities. Three components make up social structures: practices, material resources, and shared knowledge. Constructivists focus on the aspect of social structures defined as shared expectations, understandings, or knowledge (Wendt, 1995: 73).

Constructivists push us to consider the social construction of actors (Wendt, 2003: 7). According to them, one of the main things that shape the functioning of international relations is actors' beliefs and expectations about each other. These are primarily constituted by social rather than material structures (Wendt, 2003: 20). States continuously adopt identities and reconstruct their identities in relation to one another in the context of international politics (Wendt, 2003: 21).

International politics is based on social structures rather than purely material ones (Wendt, 1995: 71). Material forces produce effects at the end of their interaction with ideas (Wendt, 2003: 112). States behave based on the notions they have created about themselves within the international arena (Hudson and Day, 2020: 10). Ideas construct state preferences and interests in international politics (Hudson and Day, 2020: 10). Actors behave according to their perceptions of others and their surroundings (Wendt, 2003: 108).

Constructivists think ideas play a major role in shaping the definition of power and the nature of interests (Wendt, 2003: 96). Cultural formations of shared ideas create norms and institutions at the systemic level. Cultural formations make sense of the distribution of power either by shaping states' perceptions of the distribution of power or by shaping their identities and interests (Wendt, 2003: 104).

Social Constructivism offers a good perspective to explain China's efforts to build alternative international institutions and diplomatic initiatives that reflect its worldview. By formulating its visions of global governance in the context of China's cultural heritage and historical contributions to civilization, the Xi administration seeks to legitimize the country's role as a leading actor in shaping the world of the future. This approach resonates with constructivist ideas about the role of identity and historical memory in shaping state behavior and international relations.

3. Assertive and Self-Confident Foreign Policy

With the 2008 financial crisis, China became one of the most important actors in the global economy, especially as the American and Western European economies were seen to be more fragile (Lanteigne, 2020: 11). The rapid growth of China's economic power has grown even more significant in the aftermath of the post-2008 global financial crisis, which has accompanied President Xi

Jinping's expansion of the country's foreign policy. China became the second-largest economy in the world in 2010, surpassing Japan. In terms of economic output, China surpassed the US in 2014 according to some economic metrics, such as purchasing power parity (PPP) (Lanteigne, 2020: 2-3).

China had become the second-biggest economy and the largest trading nation in the world when Xi Jinping came to power (Bader, 2016: 6). China serves as the hub of a regional manufacturing network that connected the nations of the Asia-Pacific. China has long been the world's largest manufacturing nation and is the largest trading partner of many countries in many regions of the world (Bader, 2016: 6).

In PPP terms, China's share of world GDP rose from 4% in 1990 to over 19% in 2021, while the United States' share fell from 22% to less than 16%. Meanwhile, China became the world's largest exporter and largest importer in the 2010s. China became the largest trading partner of more than 120 countries, including other major economies (Tome, 2021: 111).

Despite the emergence of so-called "trade war" tensions with the United States in 2018 and 2019, China recorded economic growth rates of 6.6% and 6.1%, respectively. Continued economic growth makes it possible for China to compete as a great power (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 4). The new ideas of the Xi era reflect China's growing importance in the international system and the great leap in its economic, political and military power (Bader, 2016: 5).

China's dramatic economic growth has enabled it to greatly increase its defence spending. In 2001, its defence budget was estimated at around US\$ 50 billion. By 2017, this figure had risen to US\$ 228 billion. This corresponds to an increase of more than 350 per cent (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 5).

China's military spending increased by 76% between 2011 and 2020. China is rapidly increasing its share in total global military spending. In 2020, China's share of global military spending was 13%. Although far from catching up with the US, China is rapidly overtaking other powers (Tome, 2021: 112). China seeks to be at the top of Asia's security hierarchy. Thus, it believes that it can overcome US strategies to balance or contain China in the Indo-Pacific region (Song and Ai, 2023: 24).

China, which has managed to modernize its military rapidly, had 1,146 fourth and fifth generation fighter jets and 71 modern submarines in 2021. In the early 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, these figures were almost zero (Tome, 2021: 112). With two decades of double-digit budget growth, the Chinese military has begun to change the military balance in the Asia-Pacific region. China has managed to develop a huge fleet of ships capable of patrolling the South and East China Seas (Bader, 2016: 6). The huge transformation in the military capacity of the Chinese military paved the way for the ruling elite to become more confident and pursue more assertive foreign policies. The rise in China's economic and military power forms the material basis for the country to become an assertive actor on a global scale.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has become more active on the world stage with increasing confidence. President Xi began to pursue policies centred on the more activist motto of "strive for success" instead of the "bide your time, hide your shine, don't be in the forefront" principles that underpinned Deng Xiaoping's passive diplomacy strategy (Shambaugh, 2020: 17). The Xi administration has become more confident and proactive in using the country's increasing power and influence to safeguard and achieve China's national interests (Zhang, 2015: 6-7). Under Xi, China has become a more active actor in international relations than in previous decades.

China's behaviours and statements that seem to threaten the interests of Western countries and/or their allies, especially the US, or are perceived as somehow against the status quo are called assertive foreign policy (Turcsanyi, 2018: 4). While trying to protect its interests and position in the international arena, China continues its long-standing strategy of avoiding conflict. China has an

increasing willingness and ability to validate its claims and support them in new ways, both through material power elements and at the discursive level (Turcsanyi, 2018: 4).

Since China now has global economic interests, it wants to act as a global power. Having significantly improved its power capabilities, China seems willing to assert its interests openly, even at some costs. China seeks a status that would be recognised as an equal by other great powers. It seeks to achieve such a power status primarily through persuasion and peaceful means. However, if it fails to do so, it retains more coercive forms of diplomacy as an option (Baviera, 2016: 73).

Under Xi Jinping, the traditional low-profile foreign policy has been replaced by a policy of "striving for success". According to Yan Xuetong, one of China's leading international relations experts, the new Chinese foreign policy no longer focuses on keeping a low profile. It is based on demonstrating its capabilities, especially at the regional level (Yan, 2014: 153). According to Yan, the new Chinese foreign policy centred on "striving for success" is guided by a political orientation, assumption of responsibility and political virtue. Under President Xi, China's main goal is "national rejuvenation". The "strive for success" strategy is a means to maximise China's power (Yan, 2014: 164-170).

Although Xi's foreign policy approach seems more assertive at times, it cannot be said to be belligerent. Like its predecessors, the Xi administration does not envisage the use of force as the first option in solving problems (Keith, 2018: 249). While China's greater assertiveness in foreign policy is perceived negatively, especially in Western countries, it has the opposite perception within China. Chinese analysts see China's increasing assertiveness as a natural reaction of a stronger country seeking to be more influential in the international arena (Turcsanyi, 2018: 11).

The perception of some of China's foreign policy orientations as anti-Western is one of the reasons fuelling assertive foreign policy discourses (Turcsanyi, 2018: 2). China's increasing material capacity, increasing public pressure on Chinese leaders, and other countries' more active stance towards China in related fields are among the factors that feed assertive foreign policy (Turcsanyi, 2018: 4).

The failure of Western economies to recover for a long time from the global financial crisis in 2008 seriously affected the global prestige of the West. In contrast, China, which managed to overcome the crisis quickly. China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics boosted confidence in the country and inspired nationalist sentiments. Expectations have arisen in the Chinese public that their country, which has become richer and more powerful, will pursue a more effective foreign policy. After more than three decades of rapid economic growth, China had made a significant leap in the hierarchy of power and wealth. For Chinese policymakers, the goals of modernisation and the acquisition of wealth finally seemed attainable. It was believed that the time had come for China to expand its influence and achieve greater status in the international arena (Baviera, 2016: 60). Chinese decision-makers believed that their increasingly powerful country was ready to take its place among the world's great powers.

The perception that the 2008 crisis changed the global balance of power in favor of China has been one of the main factor fueling the assertive foreign policy. Chinese nationalism, which has continued to grow steadily in the post-Cold War period, is another factor supporting assertive foreign policy. The feeling of internal insecurity caused by the growing instability in certain regions of China (Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong) is another factor (Turcsanyi, 2018: 3).

The sense of insecurity created in China by the US' strategic prioritisation of the Asia-Pacific region in international politics and its orientation towards balancing China is one of the factors that triggered the new assertive foreign policy (Turcsanyi, 2018: 5). The "pivot to Asia" policy announced by the US in 2011 aimed to revitalise US alliances in the region. Chinese policymakers feared that the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the economic component of this US rebalancing towards Asia, would

encircle China. In response to this policy, China sought new strategic initiatives, including policies to enhance its maritime power (Baviera, 2016: 61).

Chinese foreign policy has been undergoing changes as a result of the greater political, military or economic capabilities the country has attained. It has also undergone a notable shift due to the accumulation of power in the hands of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Since 2012, Xi has sought to centralise power in his hands (Cuesta, 2021: 5). Personally very active in diplomacy, Xi has visited all continents and many countries. Xi emphasises that China should play a more prominent role, especially in global governance and multilateral diplomacy (Shambaugh, 2020: 17).

The Xi administration has been very active, assertive and action-oriented in foreign policy. With China's growing economic power and ambitions in recent years, its diplomacy has become increasingly "proactive". Key components of Chinese foreign policy under Xi have included resolutely upholding China's maritime interests, increasing self-assurance in its capacity to take the lead in international fora, and initiatives to create networks that will bolster China's standing in the East Asia area. (Panda and Ding, 2021: 8).

China's bolder and more confident stance in foreign policy can be seen in its foreign policy rhetoric signalling its growing power, its increasing willingness to use threats of force in various fields, and its stronger responses to problems in US-China relations (Turcsanyi, 2018: 249). China's behavior in geopolitically important maritime areas, especially in the South China Sea, is important example of its assertive foreign policy approach (Turcsanyi, 2018: 24). In the South China and East China Seas, China has not hesitated to use its armed forces as a threat to support its claims over disputed maritime areas. Since 2013, Chinese military actions in the Senkaku islands region have been a factor fuelling tensions in Sino-Japan relations (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 5). Claiming a large part of the maritime area in the South China Sea is under its sovereignty, China has established new military zones to defend its claims (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 5).

The effort to fulfil growing nationalist desires and expectations for China to reclaim its rightful position in the region and the world also triggered a hardening of rhetoric (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 6). According to the Xi administration, regaining the status of a true great power is a natural consequence of "standing up". China's effort to demonstrate its strength explains the aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy that has characterised China's foreign policy since 2019 (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 6). In the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak and in order to counter criticism of China over the way it fought the outbreak, Chinese diplomats used highly aggressive language. The term "wolf warrior" was used for these diplomats, who used harsh rhetoric to protect China's interests. This "wolf warrior" diplomacy led by senior Chinese officials further increased the division between China and the West (Deng, 2022: 217).

China has gained strong international visibility in recent years. Chinese diplomats no longer hesitate to loudly voice China's claims in foreign affairs (Lincot, 2019: 9). Under Xi, China's diplomatic spokespersons have responded to criticism from other countries with increasingly harsh statements. Therefore, the language and style adopted by China during the Xi administration have been diametrically opposed to those of its previous periods (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 5). In addition to the hardening of rhetoric, Chinese foreign policymakers have launched ambitious initiatives aimed at reshaping the international order.

4. China's New Global Visions

China's assertive attitudes and discourses in foreign policy in the new period are clearly seen in some of the visions put forward by the Xi administration. These visions are largely vague and undefined ideas (Zeng, 2020: 2). Even when they lack specific strategic plans, they are not purely rhetorical or

vacuous (Zeng, 2020: 2). Vagueness leaves room for other international actors to adopt these visions and interpret them to their own interests (Zeng, 2020: 14).

One of the main function of these foreign policy concepts is to act as a catchphrase to express intention in order to draw attention and motivate action (Zeng, 2020: 2). China's new visions are a kind of power assertion and gauging support both domestically and internationally. The global discussion of these visions is perceived as an acknowledgment of China's rising status as one of the great powers setting the global agenda (Zeng, 2020: 3).

China's global visions are ideas that reflect its desire to peacefully change and transform the regional and the global order to its advantage (Song and Ai, 2023: 24; Tome, 2021: 108). They seek to emphasize that the country's growing economic and military power does not pose a threat to other countries; on the contrary, China's rise will continue to benefit everyone (Goldstein, 2020:178). These visions play a major role in creating a positive image for Chinese government at home and abroad.

4.1. Chinese dream

After taking office, Xi Jinping set the vision of the "Chinese dream" as one of the main goals. The term was used to imply national rejuvenation, economic prosperity and the building of a better society. It refers to the goal of becoming a "moderately well-off society" in the medium term and a "modern socialist country" in the long term (Baviera, 2016: 61).

In a speech in 2012, Xi stated that the struggles since the Opium War have created bright prospects for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Achieving rejuvenation, he said, "has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the dawn of modern times". Xi sloganised the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as the Chinese dream. The Chinese dream or China's rejuvenation implies the building of a prosperous, strong and harmonious socialist country (Xi, 2017: 63-64). China's revival is aimed to be realised by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

According to Xi, the main goal of China's domestic and foreign policy is to emerge from the quagmire of the century of humiliation and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Xi analyses this process in three stages: Mao's stage of rising up, Deng's stage of prosperity, and the stage of strength that Xi promises to realise. This last stage aims to realise socialist modernisation, transforming China into a "great modern socialist country" and a "global leader in terms of combined national power and international power" (Feng, 2019: 13-14). The Chinese dream of national rejuvenation reflects nationalist aspirations of wealth, power and prestige (Deng, 2022: 9).

The Chinese dream aims to unite the country around a common identity and regain the glorious past (Kırımlı, 2023: 133). It aims for the country to collectively reach a bright future. It implies that individuals will also receive their share of the prosperity and glory that the country will achieve. The main emphasis is on the country's achievement of a prosperous and bright future (Kırımlı, 2023: 134).

In addition to greater confidence in the country's economic future, the Chinese Dream reflected the idea of revitalising China as a major economic power. The extension of these concepts to the regional level came to be explored later, when Xi began describing a "Asia-Pacific Dream" that would bring China and other regions of Asia together in mutual progress and prosperity (Lanteigne, 2020: 12). In a speech in 2014, Xi said that he expected other countries to understand and support the Chinese dream. He stated that the Chinese dream aims to ensure the prosperity of not only the Chinese people but also all other peoples. He emphasised that the Chinese dream seeks to achieve peace, development and cooperation in the international arena within the framework of the win-win principle (Global Times, 2014).

Xi has consistently claimed that China has made major new contributions to global peace and development. In this respect, Xi attributes to China the role of a country that "builds world peace", "protects international order" and "contributes to global development". Among these roles, he sees "making new and greater contributions to humanity" as the most important mission for China (Feng, 2019: 20). These objectives serve as a crucial point of reference for China's diplomacy and international standing (Panda and Ding, 2021: 3). Such ambitious foreign policy discourses, even if they do not fully reflect the current situation, gain importance in terms of setting an important agenda at home and abroad.

4.2. A new type of great power relations

One of the policies proposed by the more confident and assertive foreign policy approach of the Xi administration was a "new type of great power relations". This conceptualisation, which aims to shape the international environment in China's favour, focuses on relations with great powers.

With this strategy, the Xi administration proposed that Sino-US relations should be "away from conflict or escalation", based on "mutual respect" and "win-win co-operation". It was implied that the relations between the two countries should not be based on the competition between the rising power and the current hegemonic power, that both countries should respect each other's fundamental interests, and that both sides would gain from the cooperation between the two countries (Baviera, 2016: 66).

This conceptualization was put forward in the hope of elevating China's role in bilateral relations, and therefore the US taking China more seriously (Zeng, 2020: 16). With this strategy, China seeks to be treated on an equal footing with the US and to have its core interests recognised by the US (Baviera, 2016: 66). In his meeting with Obama in 2013, Xi stated that the Pacific Ocean has enough space for China and the US. These statements implied strategic equality between China and the US (Godement, 2013: 6).

Since the US remains the only power capable of limiting China's future development after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Sino-American relationship is of particular importance (Dittmer, 2017: xii). In this respect, the new type of great power relations was essentially envisaged to make US-China relations work. Because managing the highly complex Sino-US relations is of great importance for China. Chinese policymakers recognise that a stable and cooperative relationship with the United States is vital to sustaining China's economic development. Nevertheless, the bilateral relationship is extremely unclear and difficult due to the enormous contrasts in the two countries' objectives. Therefore, the Xi administration has introduced this strategy to keep the relationship on a manageable course. Chinese decision-makers aim to avoid conflict and confrontation with the conceptualization. They also imply mutual respect for each other's fundamental interests and cooperation within the framework of the win-win principle (Zhang, 2015: 13-14).

By proposing this new model of relations, President Xi sought to emphasize that cooperation between the two great powers would be beneficial both bilaterally and globally (Deng, 2022: 38). He prioritises the abandonment of any zero-sum approach in Sino-American relations and instead the development of a relationship based on mutual respect for each side's fundamental national interests (Freeman, 2020: 51-52). Aiming to avoid a high-level US-China confrontation, this strategy emphasises cooperation over competition.

This conceptualisation is important for the new Chinese administration to take the initiative to define and control the bilateral relationship. In the past, attempts to describe the nature of the bilateral relationship have generally originated from the United States. In 2005, the concept of 'responsible stakeholder' proposed by US officials was the most prominent. The conceptualisation

is a Chinese attempt to define the nature of China-US relations on a more equal footing. This policy proposal also reflects a demand for the United States to change its approach towards China, with greater respect for China's core interests (Zhang, 2015: 14).

Unlike its predecessors, the Xi administration has the confidence not to shy away from confrontation with the United States. The new administration has not hesitated to challenge the US wherever necessary. It did not prioritise pleasing the US (Singh, 2023: 84). The essence of China's new foreign policy is that it is perceived as a superpower on an equal footing with the US (Pradt, 2016: 201).

The goals motivating China's great power diplomacy are: Managing rivalry with the US; preventing the emergence of a US-led security architecture in East Asia; promoting multipolarity; preventing the West from acting as a whole to exert pressure; building a foundation for China's regional and global leadership; transforming its immediate neighbourhood into a strategic area of growth and influence; and creating a favourable international environment to sustain its economic development (Deng, 2022: 16).

The great power diplomacy aims to soften the rivalry between China and other great powers. Xi called for a new model of great power diplomacy with the US and described Russia as China's "most important strategic partner" (Godement, 2013: 6). The then Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised that China would build a new model of diplomacy with great powers and take a more active role in international affairs (Godement, 2013: 6).

China's interests and fields of activity have gained a global dimension in recent years. In this context, Xi talked about building a new great power diplomacy for overall stability and balanced growth. He aims to develop relations within the framework of a new type of relations with the US, a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, a partnership of peace, growth and prosperity with Europe, a partnership of unity and cooperation with the BRICS countries, a common development with African countries, and a high-level comprehensive cooperation partnership with Latin American countries (Singh, 2023: 88). The search for new types of great power relations is a reflection of China's endeavour to take its place among the great powers. On the one hand, China declares that it is a global great power, on the other hand, it expresses that it has a different vision of great power relations.

4.3. New type of international relations

In addition to aiming to redesign relations with major powers, the Xi administration also seeks to redesign international relations in general. At the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Xi Jinping stated that they would promote a "new kind of international relations". He stressed that China would help other developing countries and expand the influence of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). They will seek to strengthen the influence of developing countries in global affairs (Gyu, 2022: 2).

In a 2014 speech, Xi Jinping proposed the development of "neighbourhood diplomacy" to expand China's diplomatic strategy under new conditions. He emphasised the need to transform China's neighbouring regions into a community of common destiny for mutual benefit (Global Times, 2014). Xi called for further enhancing cooperation with other developing countries and closely integrating China's development with the destiny of other developing countries (Global Times, 2014). In this respect, developing countries are seen as China's natural allies.

Another notable outward-looking initiative of the Xi administration has been the conceptualisation of "unity of common destiny". This conceptualisation was put forward to improve China's relations with a variety of nations in general and with its neighbors in particular (Zhang, 2015: 14). Although the Xi administration has global ambitions, its main priority area has always been its immediate

neighbourhood. The ideal of unity of common destiny is expected to start from the immediate neighbourhood and spread to other regions.

Xi Jinping conceptualises another foreign policy vision as "the community of the common future for humanity". This concept expresses the desire to avoid a zero-sum understanding of international relations. By building a community of a common future based on communication, mutual respect and sincerity, it implies avoiding a competition between countries that could lead to destruction (Singh, 2023: 78).

Xi envisages this vision as "a network of partnership linking all regions of the world" (Singh, 2023: 78). He states that principles such as peace, development, justice, democracy and freedom, which are common values of humanity, will be seen as guiding principles (Singh, 2023: 79). Chinese leaders consistently emphasize peace and development at international meetings. They present peace and development as a global shared value (Song and Ai, 2023: 22). Since the international community is considered to have intertwined interests, the construction of a common future is seen as a fundamental need.

The "community of the common future" seeks to define common goals for all humanity, regardless of any differences (Song and Ai, 2023: 14). It represents China's understanding of international relations and its solution to global issues (Zeng, 2020: 17). This vision also reflects the desire for a world order in which China can play a greater role on a global scale (Zeng, 2020: 17).

Chinese politicians envision that the understanding of harmony enshrined in China's traditional philosophical texts will be an alternative for solving global problems and will lead to peace and prosperity on a global scale (Song and Ai, 2023: 22). The effort to adapt the values of harmony, virtue and benevolence found in classical Chinese culture to contemporary international relations also aims to prevent a strong China from being perceived as an aggressive and revisionist actor (Rolland, 2020: 50).

The new model of international relations is targeted at the international community and aims to project a positive image of China's growth. It tries to convey the idea that China's economic development is not only compatible with economic growth in its neighbourhood, but also necessary for its neighbours. Thus, the message is given that both China and its neighbours benefit within the framework of a win-win relationship. Behind this new understanding of international relations is China's intention to avoid being seen as a revisionist power and to prevent its actions from being perceived as a threat by its neighbours (Cuesta, 2021: 8). Although many of these visions remain at the level of rhetoric, they are important for China's global ambitions. As China grows stronger, it is trying to both strengthen the country's global image and shape the international arena within the framework of its own ambitions by introducing new initiatives towards the international community.

4.4. Rising assertiveness in international governance

The Xi administration's new diplomacy approach aims to create new platforms that China can influence to a great extent without directly challenging the existing international structure. Creating a new international environment that can limit strategic pressures from the US is of great importance for the new administration. Another point is to create an environment more favourable to China's interests (Singh, 2023: 73).

In international meetings, Xi has consistently stated that they will open the country to the world more and more, taking care to present China as the leader of the liberal economic order. China has so far been a major beneficiary of the liberal and open economic order. Thanks to its integration into the liberal economic order, it has grown from a poor and backward economy to one of the world's

largest economies. As China's economic power has grown, protectionist sentiments have started to rise in countries such as the US, the defender of the liberal economic order. The protectionist economic policies of the Trump administration have brought the two countries face to face. While Trump implemented protectionist policies against China, China started to advocate liberal free trade (Singh, 2023: 85). Although China's economy is not a full-market economy, Xi's statements at the 2017 World Economic Forum was significant in its advocacy for a liberalised economic order. At the Forum, Xi stated that China would be determined to promote the liberalisation and facilitation of international trade and investment. He also stated that there would be no winner in any trade war (Singh, 2023: 86).

China calls for a new global trade agreement that better reflects the interests of developing countries. At the same time, China is actively involved in regional initiatives to promote free trade. However, China remains wary of international organisations in which it does not participate and which seek to balance it. In this respect, China has been sensitive to American attempts to forge a security order in the Asia-Pacific by assembling all of its regional partners into a coalition that would aim to counterbalance China's power. For example, China has been sceptical of US attempts to bring together Australia, Canada, Japan and Southeast Asian countries through the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). China, which was excluded from TPP meetings despite being a major economic power, was concerned that the TPP would be used as a tool to control its regional economic power. However, following the US withdrawal from the TPP in 2017, China found itself in a stronger position to suggest alternative international initiatives (Lanteigne, 2020: 14).

At a conference in 2014, President Xi stated that Asian countries should solve Asian problems. Xi declared that he would do more to protect the security of Asians and sought alternatives to the American "strategic axis" (Keith, 2018: 249). With the entry into force of the RCEP, the largest trade bloc has come to life. Bringing together 15 Asian countries, this agreement became an indispensable factor in bringing the East Asian economies closer together. This economic partnership was an important step in bringing many Asian economies closer to China and creating an economic bloc with China at the centre (Cuesta, 2021: 8). China's spearheading of the RCEP signalled its desire to assume a leading role in the Asia-Pacific (Singh, 2023: 74).

President Xi has also taken a more active role since taking office in creating new international regimes that more accurately represent China's foreign policy objectives. China, a key BRICS influencer, provided assistance to the New Development Bank's establishment as a BRICS financial organization in 2014. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which will promote infrastructure development in developing countries, was also established by China in 2014 (Lanteigne, 2020: 14). This bank was established to meet the infrastructure needs of developing Asian countries and help implement China's Belt and Road Initiative projects (Baviera, 2016: 63).

The Belt and Road Initiative, AIIB and the New Development Bank are the most prominent strategies of assertive foreign policy. The emerging global strategies aim to increase China's influence at the regional and international levels by centring on China's economic power (Wang, 2017: 42). Western countries are generally concerned that China will use these global initiatives to gain geostrategic influence over its neighbours (Baviera, 2016: 64). These Chinese-led financial institutions are gaining importance as an alternative to Western-backed organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank.

China's growing diplomatic and "structural" power is manifested in its ability to get what it wants through skilful engagement across international organisations and norms. Besides actively participating in international organisations, China plays a central role in the development of some initiatives such as the AIIB, SCO and BRICS (Lanteigne, 2020: 15).

China's partnership portfolio has increased significantly under the Xi administration. Between 2013 and 2019, China formed strategic alliances with 103 countries, up from 65 in 2013. The expansion of China's partnerships under the Xi administration is important for the realization of the active diplomacy model. In the new era, China has sought to develop a unique diplomatic approach in line with its great power role (Liu, Wu and Wu, 2021: 192).

China was labeled a "norm shaker" during the Mao era because it openly contested the rules and regulations imposed by Western powers. It was considerably easier to be a "norm taker" in the post-Mao era, accepting and even embracing interaction with international regimes and institutions, especially the West. However, under Xi, China has shown a marked increase in its willingness to "make norms" (and/or "shape norms") by creating new organizations, institutions, and policies (Lanteigne, 2020: 15). China now aims to be a norm-making as well as a norm-receiving actor.

4.5. Belt and road initiative

The ambitious global ambitions of the Xi Jinping administration have begun to manifest themselves most concretely with the development of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) strategy. The BRI was proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013. The economic and strategic effects of this multi-billion dollar mega-initiative, which has increased China's influence in the world under Xi, are still emerging. The initiative, which has made China an important stakeholder in global development, is the most important evidence of China's growing international power (Singh, 2023: 84).

The initiative aims to create an expanding network of railways, energy pipelines and motorways connecting China to the rest of Central, South and Southeast Asia; the construction of around 50 special economic zones; and the creation of port networks linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans to Europe and Africa (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 5). In addition, China envisaged developing a "Arctic Silk Road" in 2018. This project aims to reach Northern Europe from China via Siberia and the Arctic Ocean. Due to climate change and global warming, this route is becoming increasingly inaccessible for shipping in summer (Lanteigne, 2020: 15).

The initiative has the vision of establishing a link between the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa. It aims to build infrastructure links and strengthen existing ones, promote cross-border coordination of development strategies and the opening of new markets (Baviera, 2016: 62). BRI is a long-term and ambitious regional and interregional development program (Song and Ai, 2023: 24). With the BRI, China is trying to convince other countries that it will increase world prosperity by realizing the infrastructure investments and reforms needed in the global economy (Goldstein, 2020:187).

The initiative is vital to fulfil some basic needs, such as securing China's access to energy resources, creating a secure zone in its neighbourhood and providing new markets for Chinese products (Baviera, 2016: 63). In order to counter to the anti-China coalition and break free from diplomatic isolation, China is forming a coalition with developing nations in response to pressure from developed nations like the US, Europe, Japan, and Australia (Gyu, 2022: 2). In this sense, China is trying to strengthen its economic relations with developing countries through this initiative.

The BRI is an important tool to realise Xi's "China Dream". The initiative is expected to make a major contribution to creating a China-centred order by reviving the country's historical central role (Singh, 2023: 73; Panda and Ding, 2021: 3). This ambitious project envisages the creation of a massive network of transnational infrastructure programmes, energy pipelines, power plants, ports, railways and highways to connect China with Asia, Africa and Europe. With this project, China seeks to diversify its energy supply during a period of economic slowdown, export surplus labour and construction materials, create a network of economic interdependencies that will consolidate its regional leadership and counterbalance the US alliance structure in Asia. However, unfavourable

trade balances and debt burdens with some countries may reduce the expected benefits for these countries (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 12). Such a situation may trigger reactions against the progress of infrastructure investments. Although not fully implemented, the initiative is an indicator of China's growing global economic power and status.

5. Foreign Policy Challenges Faced by the Xi Jinping Administration

Despite its more assertive and proactive stance, the Xi Jinping administration confronts more difficulties than its predecessors in handling China's foreign relations (Zhang, 2015: 15). In the second decade of the 21st century, the international environment facing China has become much more turbulent. Although China's material power continues to increase, the challenges it faces in foreign policy have also begun to increase.

China faces an increasingly unfavourable regional environment, especially in the Asia Pacific region. One reason for this is the apparent contradictions in China's various diplomatic agendas. China faces an increasing challenge in reconciling the contradictions between its interest in maintaining regional peace and its desire to protect its fundamental national interests (Zhang, 2015: 15).

China's new leadership has adopted a more proactive attitude to defend its national interests in maritime territorial conflicts for a number of reasons, including the sensitivity of national sovereignty, growing rivalry over ocean resources, and domestic nationalist pressure. However, this tough diplomatic stance has negative effects on China's broader strategic interests and position, such as maintaining regional stability. Chinese leaders have to maintain regional stability without harming China's national interests and protect national interests without causing conflicts (Zhang, 2015: 15-16). It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to maintain the delicate balance between long-term interests and short-term interests.

China's ability to influence the East Asia region in its favor is still constrained, despite its expanding economic and geopolitical power (Zhang, 2015: 7). Another major challenge is the growing concern of neighbouring and regional countries in East Asia about the geopolitical ambitions of an increasingly aggressive China (Zhang, 2015: 7). Increasing tensions between China and other claimants in the South and East China Sea conflicts are creating more space for the United States. It puts China at a disadvantage in the region where a new order is being sought with the US's strategic balancing initiatives. The Xi administration will have a far harder time than its predecessors establishing and preserving the kind of stable regional environment that is essential to China's economic development. (Zhang, 2015: 17).

Although China is a major economic power, economic incentives do not seem to be effective beyond a certain level in relations with Europe and many other countries. China's actions towards many of its neighbours hardly match President Xi's visions. While China under Xi is fighting for a status equal to that of the United States and demanding a "just" international order, its behaviour, especially in the Asia-Pacific, is perceived as aspiring to hegemony. The Xi administration displays a sharp unilateralism in its aggressive assertion of its core interests, contrary to its vision of a common future community. "Wolf warrior" diplomats aggressively defending China's interests can also be perceived as a sign of diplomatic corruption. These wolf-warrior diplomats create an image that is the opposite of the peaceful country image that China has been trying to build for years (Singh, 2023: 105).

The US rebalancing policy with its "pivot to Asia" strategy has further strained China's relations with the countries with which it has disagreements (Zhang, 2015: 7). This "rebalancing" strategy of the US endeavours to maintain US supremacy in the Asia Pacific even if it does not contain China's growing influence. Therefore, unlike previous periods, the new Chinese administration is facing increasing geopolitical pressures from the US (Zhang, 2015: 16). Since 2010, the US's increasingly

hardening policies, which started with the strategic prioritisation of the Asia-Pacific region within the framework of the "pivot to Asia" policy, have significantly changed the international environment that China faces. Starting with the "pivot to Asia" strategy, continuing with the "trade wars" and considering China as the most important competitor, the US started to adopt an increasingly harsh attitude towards China.

With the Trump administration, the US has positioned itself as China's global rival. The cooperative interaction in US-China relations was quickly replaced by competition and antagonism (Freeman, 2020: 52). During Trump's presidency, the US Indo-Pacific strategy entailed full competition with China. With the Trump administration, the US-China rivalry has reached a hostile role and intensity. The Covid-19 pandemic, on the other hand, led to the further escalation of the trade wars. Economic divergence and mutual hostile statements have strained bilateral relations (Deng, 2022: 28). The pandemic accelerated great power rivalry, with the US and China entering a more challenging cycle of competition (Deng, 2022: 218).

One of the biggest challenge to China's global image was the Corona Virus outbreak that began in 2019 (Panda and Ding, 2021: 4). The outbreak was first seen in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The outbreak spread from China, affecting millions worldwide and causing thousands of deaths. China's method of combating the outbreak led to various criticisms at home and abroad. The then US president Donald Trump openly blamed China, calling the coronavirus a "Chinese virus" (Panda and Ding, 2021: 4). Since the Covid-19 outbreak first emerged in Wuhan, China, being labelled as a disease of Chinese origin damaged China's international image (Kobierecka, 2022: 7).

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the dangers of China's development model, which seeks to improve trade, communication and connectivity between countries, but relies on controlling people's voices, news and information (Panda and Ding, 2021: 4). The pandemic has led to further questioning of China's global leadership role, leading to a loss of confidence in Chinese-backed initiatives. Even after the spread of the coronavirus slowed down, many countries were wary of any rapprochement with China. A more questioning attitude towards China's governance model and its approach to the international community began to emerge. At the same time, the pandemic has brought the growing dependence of many Asian and emerging economies on China to the fore (Panda and Ding, 2021: 5). Following the adoption of strict quarantine and lockdown measures against the coronavirus pandemic, China recorded a growth of 2.3 per cent in 2020 (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 4). This was an unprecedentedly low growth in the country's economy for a long time.

There were reports of significant delays in infrastructure projects under the BRI in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka due to the coronavirus pandemic. Restrictive travel bans have hampered the progress of existing projects. The pandemic has also caused economic stagnation in China, as in most countries. Chinese authorities have become increasingly concerned about Covid-19 causing lasting damage to the Chinese economy and the country's important role in global supply chains. The pandemic has heightened the concerns of multinational companies with China-based supply chains. Companies considering diversifying their supply chains due to the US-China trade war accelerated their plans in this direction (Haenle, 2020). With the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, some multinational companies shifted some of their production to countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and India (Kırımlı, 2023: 163).

China's increasing influence in international organisations further deepened the fears of countries worried about China's growing global influence. Especially during the Covid outbreak, China's power in the World Health Organisation was clearly visible, leading to criticism from many countries, especially the US (Haenle, 2020).

China's military rise also creates a security dilemma among states that are already concerned about China's growing power, which could lead to counterbalancing coalitions against China. This, in turn, leads to increased regional tensions (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 11-12). In his speech at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi tried to reassure the world that China's development does not pose a threat to any other country and will never seek hegemony (Shambaugh, 2020: 18). Despite the reassurances about China's good intentions and "peaceful rise", the more powerful China becomes, the more scepticism about its power grows (Shambaugh, 2020: 18). China is therefore forced to conduct its foreign relations in an increasingly hostile environment globally (Lincot, 2019: 9).

Another thing that puts China in a difficult situation in the international arena is the increased visibility of the country. China's growing international influence leads to the easy transformation of domestic issues into international ones. Many security activities shaped according to domestic needs attract international attention and even cause significant international impacts. Particularly when sensitive issues have an international impact, they become a major problem in China's foreign relations (Zhang, 2015: 158).

In the post-2012 Xi Jinping era, the issues of Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, which the Chinese leadership characterised as domestic issues, have returned as a topic of discussion in foreign policy. The pressure of domestic and foreign public opinion on these issues, which easily become foreign issues, is felt very seriously. Public opinion in China is unlikely to compromise on anything other than full Chinese sovereignty over each of these regions. The administration, which is under a very serious domestic public opinion pressure, draws the arrows of criticism from the international community when it takes a tough stance on these issues. When it adopts an uncompromising stance on these issues for fear of appearing weak both internally and externally, the entire responsibility for failing to solve the problems remains with the Xi administration (Benvenuti et al. 2022: 44).

The policies pursued by the Xi administration in Xinjian Uyghur Autonomous Region and Hong Kong are perceived as frightening practices by the international community. The policy towards Taiwan escalates regional and global tensions (Lincot, 2019: 9). With the mismanagement of Sino-US relations, a hasty decision on Taiwan could put an end to peace and development and ruin the strategic opportunity for China's national revitalisation (Deng, 2022: 11). Similarly, China's refusal to respect international and maritime rights principles in maritime disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines poses major obstacles to the establishment of a climate of trust (Lincot, 2019: 10).

China is trying to produce policies in line with its increasingly globalised economy. However, China is not yet ready to make the sacrifices and compromises that global or regional leadership requires (Baviera, 2016: 58). China is constantly having to respond to new developments and recalibrate its policies, even as it exerts increasing influence in Asia and beyond. Under Xi, scepticism and mistrust of China in the West has only increased. Unexpected events such as trade wars and the coronavirus pandemic have severely tested China's strategic planning (Deng, 2022: 10).

6. Conclusion

Since Deng Xiaoping, China has pursued "low-profile" foreign policy. This policy saw a peaceful international environment as the top priority for China's economic development. With Xi Jinping, China replaced the traditional low-profile foreign policy with a more assertive and self-confident policy based on the motto of "striving for success".

China's behaviours and attitudes that seem to threaten the interests of Western countries or are perceived as somehow against the status quo are perceived as assertive foreign policy. Although Xi's foreign policy approach seems more assertive at times, it cannot be said to be belligerent. The Xi administration, like previous administrations, maintains the strategy of avoiding conflict while trying to protect China's interests in the international arena. Under the Xi administration, China does

not hesitate to assert its claims in the international arena more openly both with material power elements and at the discursive level.

The Xi administration started to emphasise new strategies such as "China's rejuvenation", "Chinese Dream" and "a common future for mankind". Giving greater priority to foreign policy, Xi claims that China should practice "great power diplomacy" and advocates a "new type of great power relations". Great power diplomacy aims to shape the international environment, which directly affects China's core interests and status goals.

The project that most concretely demonstrates the Xi administration's global ambitions is the BRI launched in 2013. The initiative is China's most important tool to shape the international arena in its favour. It is hoped that the initiative will revitalise China's historical central role and contribute greatly to the creation of a China-centred order. The Xi administration views multilateral institutions and multilateral initiatives as a means to implement China's agenda and expand its space and influence in the international community.

The Xi administration faces greater challenges in managing China's foreign relations than in previous eras. Although he took office as a transformer, Xi Jinping is also likely to be the leader who stalls China's rise. The Xi administration's active foreign policy attitudes and behaviours have not necessarily increased China's sphere of influence. Especially in some of its neighbours and Western countries, the new administration's ambitious foreign policy strategies have had the opposite effect. In this respect, the Xi administration has further increased the concerns of countries worried about China's rise.

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