

Research Article

Understanding the transformation in Chinese foreign policy: A historical evaluation from 1949 to 2019

Emre Demir ^{1,*}

¹ Assistant Professor, Political Science and International Relations Department, TED University, Ankara, Turkey. ORCID: 0000-0002-9580-863X.

* Correspondence: emre.demir@tedu.edu.tr

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Abstract: This study examines how China's changing status since its establishment influences its relations with the outside world. Here, it is argued that in order to make a claim on whether China's changing status transforms the country into a status quo or a revisionist power, first of all, a distinction needs to be made between pre- and post-reform eras. While in the Maoist era China had a commitment to world revolution and hence, supported armed insurgencies throughout the world, it later abandoned this revolutionary rhetoric and the associated policies and replaced them with a policy of economic reform, opening up and integrating with the world economy. In the post-Mao period, up until Xi Jinping took the helm, China's sole grand strategy was to reform its economic model and to build a state capitalist political economic system while positioning itself at the centre of global production networks. Under Xi, however, the country launched a new grand strategy, namely the Chinese Dream, seeking to transform its strengths into a more assertive foreign policy that would position it at the centre of global affairs. Indeed, today's China, which replaced the goal of global revolution with the goal of being the champion of neoliberal globalization, lies at the heart of the capitalist system.

Keywords: People's Republic of China, Chinese foreign policy, world politics, Communist Party of China

Çin dış politikasındaki dönüşümü anlamak: 1949'dan 2019'a tarihsel bir değerlendirme

Öz: Bu çalışma, kuruluşundan bu yana Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin statüsünde yaşanan değişimin dış dünyayla olan ilişkilerini nasıl etkilediğini ele almaktadır. Çalışma, Çin'in değişen statüsünün ülkeyi bir statükocu mu, yoksa revizyonist bir güce mi dönüştürdüğü konusunda bir savda bulunmak için, her şeyden önce reform öncesi ve sonrası dönemler arasında bir ayrım yapılması gerektiği öne sürmektedir. Maocu dönemde Çin, dünya devrimi idealine bağlı ve bu ideal için dünyanın dört bir yanında silahlı ayaklanmaları desteklemişken, Mao sonrası dönemde ekonomik reform, dışa açılma ve dünya ekonomisiyle bütünleşme politikası karşılığında bu devrimci söylemi ve politikaları terk etmiştir. Çin'in Mao sonrası dönemde, Xi Jinping'in liderliğine kadarki süreçte tek büyük stratejisi, ekonomi modelini ıslah ederek ve devlet kapitalizmi inşa ederek kendisini küresel üretim ağlarının merkezine yerleştirmek olmuştur. Ne var ki Xi Jinping ile birlikte Çin, gücünü, kendisini dünya meselelerinin merkezine yerleştirecek daha iddialı bir dış politikaya aktarmak için yeni bir büyük strateji, yani Çin Rüyasını, başlatmıştır. Küresel devrim hedefini neoliberal küreselleşmenin şampiyonu olma hedefi ile değiştirmiş olan günümüz Çin'i kapitalist sistemin kalbinde yer almaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti, Çin dış politikası, dünya siyaseti, Çin Komünist Partisi

Introduction

The re-emergence of China and its relations with the United States (US)-led liberal world order, has been high on the agenda of international relations since the 1990s. Many realist scholars, looking at past history, view this development as a threat to the existing international system and its lead power, similar to the one posed by Nazi Germany and Japan in the first half of the 20th century. In other words, for optimist scholars, the primary revisionist power in the international system, and hence the main threat to US interests, is China. When its colossal material capabilities are viewed alongside projections of its future economic growth, realists argue that China will eventually come to challenge the existing international system and seek to become the next hegemon, at least in the Asian region. This might, in the end, create a Thucydides trap between the

two powers, resulting eventually in war (Allison 2017; Friedberg 2005; Mearsheimer 2001, 2014).

Liberal scholars, on the other hand, tend to emphasise the positive aspects of China's increasing visibility in the international system. Highlighting China's economic dynamism and its integration into the global political economy, they suggest that as its economic integration continues and interdependency between China and the rest of the world, especially the US, increases, the country is transforming into a responsible stakeholder that pursues a foreign policy that is compatible with the current international system. Furthermore, its eager engagement in regional and international organisations, institutions and regimes has decreased the previous uncertainty about its intentions and has thus led to a building of trust between China and the other actors (Beeson 2013, 238–239; He & Feng 2012, 639; Johnston 2003, 2012).

The vast majority of these approaches focus almost exclusively on China's external relations in the post-1989 era while ignoring the early decades of the republic. Such a perspective, however, fails to fully elucidate China's position in the world order. This study aims to contribute to the debate on China's changing status by taking a much broader perspective and examining its foreign policy since the foundation of the republic. Accordingly, the second and third parts of the study examine Chinese foreign policy over the last seven decades since 1949. By analysing China's foreign policy from a historical perspective, it will be determined whether or not China is following the path suggested in mainstream International Relations theories as it increases its capabilities day by day. Finally, the paper will conclude with an evaluation of China's historical relationship with the existing world order.

It is argued that before ascertaining whether China's changing status has transformed the country into a status quo or a revisionist power, it is first necessary to make a distinction between the pre- and post-reform eras. China was formerly committed to global revolution, and so supported armed insurgencies around the world, but it later abandoned this revolutionary rhetoric and the associated policies and replaced them with a policy of economic reform that meant opening up to and integrating with the global economy. As such, claims of a "China threat" and a "Thucydides trap" may be considered somewhat exaggerated, especially when comparing post-Mao foreign policy with Maoist China's aspirations for global revolution. Furthermore, in the post-Mao period, up until Xi Jinping's presidency, China's sole grand strategy was to reform its economic model and build a state capitalist political economic system while positioning itself at the centre of global production networks. Under Xi, however, the country launched a new grand strategy for its relations with the outside

world, namely the Chinese Dream, seeking to transfer its strengths into a more assertive foreign policy that would position the country at the centre of global affairs.

Chinese foreign policy during the Maoist era

From the early days of the republic to the final days of the Mao era, China's foreign policies were deeply affected by Mao's thinking and ideological standpoint, and by fluctuations in domestic politics, which were also significantly influenced by Mao. The very first move of the newly declared republic in foreign affairs was to establish diplomatic relations with other socialist states, with a view to forming an alliance with the leader of the socialist camp – the Soviet Union. This goal was achieved on 14 February 1950 when the two sides signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. The most important aspect of the treaty for China was the provision of security, and economic and military aid by the Soviets, which was crucial for the reconstruction of the country in the aftermath of the Japanese invasion and the civil war (Mark 2012, 19–21).

Although the Sino-Soviet alliance was formed to counter the Western capitalist bloc, at the time of the alliance, unlike in Europe, the Cold War in Asia had not yet fully taken hold. Accordingly, on 5 January 1950, US President Harry S. Truman declared that they had no intention of getting involved in a conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan (the Republic of China) (Mark 2012, 21). However, the US position changed with the outbreak of the Korean War, when Dean Acheson, the then US Secretary of State, stated that "Korea came along and saved us" – by "us", meaning the hawkish flank of the administration who were in favour of a confrontationist policy against the communist "threat" in Asia. With the war, the containment strategy was expanded also into Asia, and US military spending witnessed a sharp increase. In line with its containment policy, the US started providing support to the non-socialist states and societies surrounding China, including Taiwan (Stubbs 2005, 64–65). The direct conflict with the US on the Korean peninsula had two opposing consequences for China. First of all, the US imposed a trade embargo on China and blocked its membership of the United Nations (UN), which pushed China closer to the Soviet Union, and made the US its number one enemy. On the other hand, China's military victory against US forces raised its prestige around the world, especially in non-Western countries (Mark 2012, 27).

In 1954, Zhou Enlai, the then Foreign Minister and Premier of China, formulated the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", as the guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy, although these principles were in direct

contradiction with Mao's belief that conflict between the socialist and capitalist camps was inevitable. Mao, however, supported Zhou's formulation, as in the early 1950s, China, in accordance with its socialist identity, had formulated a Third World identity and initiated a policy of solidarity with the Third World, and Zhou's principles were an important pillar of this initiative (Mark 2012, 33, 53).

In the late 1950s, China's relations with the Soviet Union began to deteriorate, and in 1960 the Soviets withdrew their military and economic personnel from China. This had a significant negative impact on the Chinese economy, which was already suffering the damage of the economic disaster that the Great Leap Forward had done, and hence aroused hatred against the Soviet Union (Mark 2012, 40). In the 1960s, when the Sino-Soviet alliance came to a virtual end, the two countries started to compete for the leadership of the socialist camp and to secure their respective influence over the Third World countries, especially the newly independent African nations. In time, their bilateral relations worsened to such an extent that in 1969 there were even armed conflicts on the Sino-Soviet border (Mark 2012, chap. 4).

In the early 1960s, China started following an independent foreign policy, and in mid-1962, Mao initiated a foreign policy that was driven by a more leftist ideology. According to Mao, "China should struggle against the imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries at home and abroad, and provide more assistance to national liberation fighters around the world" (Mark 2012, 51). In the following year, he formulated a new foreign policy aimed at strengthening China's relationship with the "two intermediate zones" that Mao identified between the two superpowers. The first zone was formed by the economically backward countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, whereas the latter encapsulated the advanced and imperialist countries of Europe, as well as Japan and Canada. According to Mao, his country was both a member of the first zone and the leader of the world's national liberation wars and was thus at the centre of the world revolution and on the front line of the fight against imperialism. This, however, did not preclude the improvement of China's relations with the nations in the second intermediate zone. Accordingly, in line with its independent foreign policy, in the early 1960s China developed its relations especially with France (Mao 1998, 387–389; Mark 2012, 53–54, 60).

In the second half of the 1960s, as a reflection of the turmoil in domestic politics China's foreign policy underwent a dramatic transformation. In 1966, to prevent China's departure from socialism and to perpetuate the "continuous revolution", Mao launched his Cultural Revolution against the "capitalist roaders", bureaucratisation, and corrupt bureaucrats and "revisionists". This

revolution had a marked effect not only on domestic politics, but also China's foreign relations. During the radical phase of the Revolution (1966–69), Beijing proclaimed its pursuit of a policy of "anti-imperialism" and "anti-revisionism", seeking to export its revolution to other countries. At the end of 1967, Mao began to realise that his ultra-leftist foreign policy had alienated other states, both friends and foes, such that during the Cultural Revolution, Vietnam moved away from China and closer to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, in 1968, to fight the counter-revolution, the Warsaw Pact members invaded Czechoslovakia, and in the following year, armed conflicts broke out on the Sino-Soviet border. All of these developments turned Mao's attention to the Soviet threat and forced him to abandon his ultra-leftist revolutionism in favour of a pragmatic foreign policy, which included improving relations with the US – the leading imperialist power (Mark 2012, 63–69).

With this pragmatic policy, Mao once again subjected China's identity to a transformation. In the early 1970s, the country suddenly became a friend of the US while maintaining egregious relations with the Soviet Union. Mao even offered to create a "horizontal line" to the US to stop the Soviet threat. After a series of confidential communications, US President Richard Nixon visited China in February 1972, and the two sides issued the Shanghai Communique, which was based on Zhou Enlai's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Under the communique, the two sides agreed that no state would be allowed to seek hegemony in the region, and the obvious target of the communique was of course the Soviet Union. As China was once again formally accepted as a member of the international community, a strategic triangle between China, the Soviet Union and the US was established in Asian politics, placing China at the centre of regional politics along with the two superpowers (Mark 2012, 72–87; Radchenko 2016).

After Nixon resigned from office in 1974, US foreign policy came under the control of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, under which the rapprochement between the "new friends" did not last long. Mao suspected Kissinger was using China to appease the Soviet Union, just as Britain had appeased Germany in 1938, and playing both sides (Frankel 1999; Radchenko 2016). As a result, that same year, Mao formulated his "Three Worlds Theory", defining three groups of states in which the two superpowers belonged to the first world, the second world included the developed countries of western Europe, Japan, Australia and Canada, and the third world encapsulated all the rest, namely the Asian, African and Latin American countries. With his Three Worlds Theory, Mao once again turned China's attention to the Third World, seeing the struggle against the two superpowers as they competed for global hegemony and the global revolution as

principle strategies for the emancipation of the oppressed people of the world (Mao 1974; Mark 2012, 87–91).

Chinese foreign policy in the post-reform era

After Mao's death, and especially after Deng Xiaoping took power in 1978 and initiated the economic opening up and modernisation process, China's foreign policy once again changed direction, and a new era of rapprochement with the US began. In this period, to modernise its economy, China desperately needed foreign capital and technology. The militant policies of the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and its invasion of Afghanistan had pushed China and the US towards each other, and as a result, from 1979 onwards, several events served to strengthen the bilateral relations between the US and China considerably: diplomatic relations were established, Deng made an official visit to the US, and the US decided to grant China most favoured nation status. The following year, the US went a step further, supporting China's membership of the World Bank. A compromise was reached even on the Taiwan issue, and the US-China Joint Communiqué on US Arms Sales to Taiwan was signed in 1982 (Mark 2012, 98–101).

After 1982, however, following the Reagan administration's insistence on selling arms to Taiwan, bilateral relations once again deteriorated. Furthermore, as a result of systemic changes, the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) believed that the power balance between the two superpowers was shifting in favour of the US. Accordingly, China felt a need to revisit its foreign policy, and in September 1982, during the 12th Party Congress, the CPC declared that from then on, China would follow an independent foreign policy, abandoning any grand strategy related to the export of communism, while also continue to opposing hegemony, regardless of whether it be Soviet or US in origin (Dittmer 1983, 121; Mark 2012, 101-102). Congressional documents reflected this policy explicitly, "No foreign country can expect China to be its vassal, nor can it expect China to swallow any bitter fruit that will be detrimental to Chinese interests" (Dittmer 1983, 121). In his address to the Congress, Deng announced three major tasks for the remainder of the 1980s. Highest priority was given to economic construction and socialist modernisation, while the second and third rankings were filled by efforts aimed at the reunification of the country, and especially the return of Taiwan to the mainland, and foreign policy-related activities opposing hegemony, imperialism and colonialism (Dittmer 1983, 115–116, 121; Mark 2012, 102). Notwithstanding its declared intention to follow an independent foreign policy, China continued expanding its economic, political and cultural cooperation with the US up until 1989. In other words, throughout

the 1980s, even though China, in rhetoric, pursued an independent foreign policy, it continued to maintain its US-oriented policies (Mark 2012, 107).

The events witnessed in Chinese and global politics between 1989 and 1991 that started with events in Tiananmen Square in Beijing were some of the most dramatic and significant in modern Chinese history, as well as in world history. These events traumatised the CPC and the Chinese elite and changed the way they engaged in politics, both domestically and internationally. On 4 June 1989, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), under orders from the CPC, cracked down on the student protests that had been taking place in Tiananmen Square since 15 April. The intense support of the demonstrations by the urban residents terrified the Party elders, led by Deng, by reminding them both of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which led to the overthrow of the government in Beijing, and the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement in Poland that led to the end of socialism in the country. To prevent such scenarios from befalling China, the elders decided to stop the demonstrations at any cost, but their brutal response had a great impact on the party state's relationship with Chinese society, as well as China's relations with the outside world. Immediately after the crackdown, the US, Western and most Eastern European states, Australia, Canada and Latin American countries protested and criticised the PLA's maltreatment of the protesters, and developed countries in the West applied sanctions against China, suspending loans, cancelling previously agreed investments and putting an arms embargo in place that still exists today. However, many Asian governments acted in the opposite direction, launching diplomatic initiatives to engage with rather than isolate China. Soon after the incident, Japan also changed its obdurate stance, and joined the initiative launched by Asian governments by normalising its relations with China (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 427–428; Saich 2004, 210; Shambaugh 2004, 67–68). Nevertheless, the Tiananmen incident had a dramatic effect both on the party state and Chinese society, bringing about a disintegration between the Party and society that resulted in a legitimacy crisis for the CPC. Furthermore, the country's isolation from the West caused significant damage to its international reputation (Dickson 2002, 123). The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989 and then the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 escalated the CPC's legitimacy crisis even further, causing great concern within the CPC leadership. In fear of encountering a similar problem to the one experienced by the Soviet Union, the CPC leadership sought to make Tiananmen a taboo issue, and stepped up their efforts to maintain the dominant position of the Party in the Chinese economy, politics and society (Saich 2004, 73).

In the aftermath of these domestic and international developments, China once again sought to adjust its identity and role in world affairs. During the 14th

National Congress of the CPC in October 1992, to speed up the economic reform process, Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the Party, introduced the “socialist market economy” concept, following the advice of Deng. Maintaining the low-profile foreign policy approach formulated by Deng in the post-Tiananmen era, Jiang sought not to attract attention, especially from the US. On the issue of reunification with Taiwan, however, Jiang adopted a nationalist approach, presenting an eight-point proposal for a peaceful unification with Taiwan that was subsequently rejected by Taipei. In 1995–1996, China chose to abandon its low-profile in exchange for coercive policies that included naval exercises and missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. This served to increase the tension not only between Beijing and Taipei, but also between Beijing and Washington, although the resulting crisis would not last long, as in 1997, China again changed the course of its general foreign policy, formulating a more creative and constructive approach that improved China’s relations not only with the US, but also its neighbourhood. In line with this policy change, China deepened its engagement with such regional and international institutions as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). China also instigated the ASEAN Plus Three grouping that consisted of ASEAN members China, Japan and South Korea (Mark 2012, 118–119; Shambaugh 2004, 69). China’s active engagement policy in the 1990s, according to Alastair I. Johnston, led the country to become more involved in international organisations than its level of development warranted. In accordance with its efforts to embrace multilateralism, from 1992 to 1997, China reduced its average tariff rate by more than half, from above 40 percent to slightly below 20 percent, and this trend was furthered with its accession to the WTO in 2001 (Johnston 2003, 13–15).

In addition to the political and economic fields, China also demonstrated its acceptance of international rules and norms through its increased collaborations in security and arms control issues. In 1997, China and ASEAN made a declaration rejecting the use of force for the resolution of the disputes over the South China Sea. Furthermore, throughout the 1990s, China signed a number of international agreements related to the protection of social, cultural, political and economic rights (Mark 2012, 119–120), including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996, and it also joined the Zangger Committee on nuclear export control (He and Feng 2012, 639). As a result, the US government made an official proclamation of China’s improved performance in the field of arms control (Johnston 2003, 18).

China’s status and identity as a responsible stakeholder was confirmed, at least by the regional countries, during the 1997/8 Asian financial crisis. According

to Robert Sutter, "The Asian financial crisis was the turning point in the evolution of the Chinese view from minimalism to unprecedented activism in multilateral diplomacy" (Mark 2012, 120). During and after the crisis, by stabilising its currency and providing aid and low-interest loans to the worst-affected economies of Southeast Asia, China took on the role of stabiliser. In the eyes of many Southeast Asian nations, and especially when compared to the US and Western financial institutions like the IMF, China's prestige as a responsible state that was essential for regional stability rose exponentially (Breslin 2008, 140; Mark 2012, 119). In short, throughout the 1990s, in the eyes of both regional and non-regional actors, Beijing was "playing by the rules", had transformed into a "responsible state" and was pursuing a foreign policy that was compatible with the existing international system.

China carried its multilateral and creative policies over also into the 2000s, and in 2001, after a long and arduous negotiation process during which China had to make important concessions to the US, from reducing trade barriers to curbing agricultural subsidies, and from protecting intellectual property rights to the liberalisation of the financial system, the country joined the WTO. One of the primary reasons China agreed to make such concessions was the paramount importance that WTO membership had for the economic modernisation and development of the country. On the other hand, by joining the WTO, the Chinese leadership aimed to gain a greater say in the way world affairs were conducted (Mark 2012, 123; Schweller and Pu 2011, 54). While it cannot be stated with any certainty that China has become the rule maker in the global political economy, it is clear that the country's WTO membership has strengthened its position in at least trade regime related matters.

The four months from November 2002 to March 2003 represented another significant period in Chinese politics and the history of the CPC with the entry into office of the fourth-generation leadership, when Hu Jintao became General Secretary of the CPC and the President of the country and Wen Jiabao became the Premier in a smooth handover of authority. During their 10 years in power, the Hu-Wen administration's main foreign policy direction had been the sustainment of a low profile, although new concepts were also brought to the table. In late 2003, at the Boao Forum for Asia, Zheng Bijian, the then Vice Principal of the Central Party School and a top-level advisor to the administration, offered the term "peaceful rise", which soon replaced by "peaceful development" due to the negative connotations of the term "rise", especially among Western countries (Zheng 2005). Championing the concept of peaceful development, the ruling elite of China sought to overcome the "China threat theory" (Gertz 2000; Krauthammer 1995; Rice 2000) that was commonly

referred to by the hawks of the US academia and administration. Later, in line with this policy, at the UN Summit of September 2005, Hu put forward the concept of “Harmonious World”, emphasising the need for equality and openness in, and the democratisation of, world affairs, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse civilisations (Hu 2005). In other words, Hu declared his country’s willingness to reform the unilateral, undemocratic and Western-centric outlook of the existing world order into a more democratic and multilateral one.

In harmony with the peaceful development and harmonious world approaches under the fourth-generation leadership, China continued its engagement policy, especially with its own neighbourhood. For instance, different from the mid-1990s, during and after the 2004 Taiwan presidential election, the Hu-Wen administration took a moderate stance against Chen Shui-bian, the pro-independence leader of Taiwan. This approach helped to improve the relationship between the two sides when Ma Ying-jeou, the Kuomintang candidate, won the following elections in 2008 (Mark 2012, 127–128). On the issue of North Korea’s nuclear program, in 2006–2007, the country increased its collaboration with the US, Japan and South Korea and hosted the six party talks aimed at resolving the issue and participated in the international sanctions imposed on North Korea (Christensen 2011, 56). Furthermore, in 2002, China agreed with the ASEAN states to form a free trade area (CAFTA) by 2010. Since entering into force, CAFTA has developed into the largest free trade area in the world in terms of population (around 2 billion people), and the third largest free trade area after the EU and NAFTA in terms of GDP (Dong-chon 2007; Hung and Liu 2012, 5; Mark 2012, 129).

China has also improved its relations with its eastern and southern neighbours. Since the early 2000s, China’s relationship with Russia has improved significantly. In 2001, the two signed the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, and in the same year, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional organisation focusing on border security, was established by Russia, China and four Central Asian countries, namely Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Even though the organisation was established by six founding members, it continues to function under the joint leadership of Russia and China, which makes it a unique organisation, and China’s first effort to initiate and lead an international organisation. The SCO, with focus on regional security and terrorist movements, over the following decade developed into an important tool in the maintenance and reinforcement of Sino-Russian relations. Moreover, China’s relationships with its neighbours to the north and west have been further strengthened with

the increases in trade and investments and the improved cooperation in energy related issues (Ferdinand 2007, 854–855; Lo 2008, 104–105).

In the 2000s, China has furthered its relations not only with its Asian neighbours, but also with other parts of the globe. This was especially the case in the economic field. The implementation of the “going out strategy” in 1999 saw China encouraging private and state-owned enterprises to invest abroad in diverse regions, which significantly increased and strengthened China’s economic and financial interactions with continents other than Asia. As a result, by 2009 – the year after the global financial crisis began – more than 13,000 Chinese companies had started doing business abroad in sectors as diverse as mining, energy, agriculture and construction (Godement, et al. 2012; Mark 2012, 130–132; Nash 2012). According to Elizabeth Economy, China’s implementation of the “going out strategy” has seen it act like a revolutionary power that transforms the world as it transforms itself (Economy 2010, 142). Another important initiative aimed at improving relations with non-Asian continents was the establishment of the BRIC(S) grouping in 2009 with Brazil, Russia and India, to which South Africa was added the following year (Li 2011, 333–336). Even though BRICS has recently lost steam due to the economic difficulties sustained by South Africa, Brazil and Russia, and the replacement of the leftist government with far-right leadership in Brazil, especially in the immediate post-global financial crisis period, it continues to be an important non-Western voice in world affairs.

According to a number of commentators, this positive momentum was lost after the global financial crisis in 2008 (Christensen 2011, 57; He and Feng 2012). First, cooperation in the North Korean nuclear program was loosened, and Beijing chose to side with the Pyongyang regime when the latter conducted nuclear and missile tests in 2009, developed a uranium-enrichment facility, shelled the South Korean island of Yeongpyeong and sank a South Korean naval vessel in 2010. China further protected its long-time friend by vetoing an international condemnation effort within the UN Security Council, while also providing the country with economic support (Christensen 2011, 57–58). As could be expected, China’s support of the Pyongyang regime had a negative impact on its relations with the US, Japan and South Korea.

There were also other problems affecting Sino-US and Sino-Japanese relations. Iran’s nuclear program and China’s nonparticipation in the UN sanctions against Tehran in 2010, the US arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010 and President Barack Obama’s postponed meeting with the Dalai Lama in February 2010 led to friction between the two governments (Christensen 2011, 58–59). Since Beijing regards the Taiwan and Tibet problems to be issues of

territorial integrity, the US involvement in these issues, as expected, has served to provoke the country. Another issue that has further heightened tensions that has brought fear to East Asian countries was the re-emergence of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands problem in September 2010. After a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese coastguard vessel, the captain of the fishing boat was detained by the Japanese authorities, resulting in a crisis between China and Japan. As time went by, Chinese officials harshened their attitudes towards Japan, and demanded an official apology from the Japanese side, threatening an embargo on the delivery of rare earth exports to Japan (Johnston 2013, 21–23). All in all, it would not be fair to blame only the Chinese side for the rising tension in the region and in the Sino-US relationship, as all sides have contributed to the deteriorating situation in the region during the immediate post-2008 period.

The Hu-Wen era of the CPC, which is referred to by some as the lost decade in Chinese politics and foreign policy (Li and Cary 2011), ended with the appointment of Xi Jinping first as the General Secretary of the CPC in November 2012, and then as the President of China in March 2013. Under Xi, Chinese foreign policy has transformed from being uncoordinated and non-committal to being more coordinated, active, creative and assertive (Ferdinand 2016, 942). This change can be seen as a process of transition from the long-time implemented low-profile policy, to a strategy of striving for achievement (Yan 2014), which can be defined as the creation of suitable conditions for the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation. This dream is the desire of the CPC to transform “China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful” (Xi 2018, 34). In other words, the Party aims to develop China into a superpower by the mid-21st century.

In line with the efforts towards the fulfilment of the Chinese Dream, Beijing has launched new initiatives in its relationships with the outside world. In November 2013, in a bid to secure its eastern borders, China announced an East China Sea Defence Identification Zone that overlapped the Japanese, South Korean and Taiwanese zones. As a result, its relations with South Korea, but especially with Japan and the US, have become strained (Peng Er 2017, 89–90). China has also taken an assertive approach in the South China Sea, increasing its efforts to build new islands and to challenge the pretensions of other claimants, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. China’s increasing assertiveness in the region has resulted in an increased visibility of US forces, through either Freedom of Navigation patrols or joint military drills with regional partners (Zhao 2017, 497).

An important pillar of Xi’s active foreign policy has been the country’s determination to engage in multilateral groupings and summit diplomacy.

During Xi's presidency, China hosted several summits, like the G20 2016 Summit, the 22nd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting and the 2017 BRICS Summit (Xi 2018, 9). Furthermore, to increase China's presence and to improve its relations with other countries, Xi and other senior officials have actively visited countries around the world where they have taken part in bilateral and multilateral meetings.

Aside from all these, the most important aspect of the Xi era has been the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in late 2013, being a range of economic, political and societal projects that seek, on the one hand, to increase connectivity within the Eurasian region by developing the regional infrastructure, while on the other hand helping China overcome its economic, political and security problems. More specifically, through the BRI, by positioning itself both as the genesis and the heart of Eurasian connectivity and economic cooperation, China aims to overcome its industrial overcapacity problems. Furthermore, by supporting western rural development efforts with the BRI, the country hopes to maintain security in the Xinjiang region. Through this western expansion, Beijing seeks further to bypass the US containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific, and to link the Chinese economy to the European markets via the Eurasian land transport system (Lee, Wainwright and Glassman 2018, 426–428; Wang 2016, 457–461). Last but not least, China aims to transform the Chinese Dream into a "Eurasian Dream" with the BRI, and if China can successfully implement the BRI, then it may accomplish Xi's Chinese Dream of securing a position for China at the centre of the global political economy.

Conclusion: An assessment

China's rapid economic development, increasing wealth and improving military capabilities have sparked a debate about the possible impacts of China's changing status on the existing international order and the waning US hegemony. While pessimists tend to consider this development to be a threat to the existing international system and its leading power, optimists discuss the positive sides of China's changing status, citing its economic dynamism and increased integration into the global political economy and evaluating the country as a responsible stakeholder. These approaches, however, focus almost exclusively on the post-1989 era China while ignoring the early decades of the republic. Such a perspective, however, provides an insufficient overview of China's position in the world order. This study has sought to fill this gap in literature by taking a much broader view of Chinese foreign policy since the establishment of the country in 1949.

As can be ascertained from this overview of China's relations with the outside world, for now, it is very hard to predict whether China's changing status will transform the country into a revisionist or status quo power. Before passing judgement on the issue, rather than only focusing on the last three decades, scholars need to take a broader perspective and compare recent developments with the past, as such an analysis would reveal that China's external relationships in the post-1949 period are rife with fluctuations and discrepancies, depending on the identity that is assumed by the country. In the Maoist era, from time to time, depending on Mao's evaluation of international but also domestic circumstances, China had changed its identity multiple times. The country started its journey as staunch junior ally of the Soviet Union. From the mid-1950s, the country began to replace this first identity with a Third World identity. Such that, in due course, old allies turned into enemies and a rivalry for the leadership of the socialist camp erupted among China and the Soviet Union. This antagonism came to a head with the initiation of the Cultural Revolution and China's red foreign policy. However, in a short time, China once again changed its identity and started a policy of détente with the US and softened its revolutionary approach.

China's most significant identity shift occurred with Deng's replacement of Mao. With Deng's succession as the paramount leader, China abandoned its revolutionary identity for good and initiated the policy of capitalist transformation and integration with the world political economy as its sole purpose. Accordingly, to have good relations especially with the US, the country adopted a foreign policy leaned towards the West. However, this Western-, especially US-centric policy came to a halt with the Tiananmen incidents of 1989, which resulted in the isolation of the country from the Western world for a brief time. Furthermore, the collapse of first the socialist bloc and then the Soviet Union created a sense of loneliness and a legitimacy crisis for the CPC elite. To overcome this negative mood, the Party leadership adopted the policy of lying low in international affairs and fastened the neoliberal transformation of the economy. As a result of these policies, even the US acknowledged China's new status and identity as a responsible stakeholder of the international system.

In the last decade, especially with the leadership of Xi, the country began to slowly change its compliant policies with a more assertive, active and creative foreign policy. According to some, this transformation is a proof of China's hidden ultimate goal of challenging and replacing the US as the hegemon of the international system. However, as this overview demonstrates, People's Republic, throughout its existence, has had a number of different identities from being the champion of a world revolution to being a responsible stakeholder,

which makes it hard for an interpreter to make a claim on the country's future intentions. Only with the presidency of Xi, the country started following a grand strategy, namely the Chinese Dream, which aims to achieve a superpower status by the mid-21st century. Nevertheless, due to its habit of frequently changing its identity, it is still very early to claim whether the country will be a challenger, a reformer or a supporter of the international system, especially when it is so much integrated with the global political economy.

In short, when compared to the red foreign policy of the Maoist era, despite the fact that it today has much greater material capacity with which to influence the global political economy, China has replaced the goal of global revolution with the goal of championing the neoliberal globalisation (Xi 2017), and now lies at the heart of the capitalist system. Finally, rather than being an existential threat to the system, by positioning itself at the centre of the global production chains, it can be claimed that China has played the role of a saviour for the capitalist system. However, everything comes with a price, and the price China has put on this role is to have a stronger say in the way the global political economy is conducted.

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