

Essays

Understanding China's foreign policy in Xi Jinping's "New Era"

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At the 19th Congress of China's Communist Party held in October 2017, President's Xi's "Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" were unveiled. Since then Chinese party officials, theoreticians and experts have been busy expounding and elaborating on China's policies in socialism's "new era" which China has supposedly entered. The 'new era' signifies a stage in the rise of China in which the country will first become a moderately advanced country by 2030 and an advanced country by 2049—the centenary year of the Communist Party's rise to power and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In the sphere of foreign policy, the Chinese swear by "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era". This is a signal for a 'new' kind of great power foreign policy.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a speech delivered at the China Institute of International Studies in December 2017, summarised five aspects of China's foreign policy in the 'new era', namely, drawing up a blueprint for the Belt and Road Initiative; strongly supporting economic globalization; working for stable relationship among the world's major countries; maintaining stability in the neighborhood and pushing for regional cooperation; and raising the profile of cooperation amongst BRICS countries (Yi, 2018). He emphasised that Chinese diplomacy is guided by the tradition of

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5000-year-old Chinese culture. He claimed, in this period China would uphold the five principles of peaceful coexistence and the existing international system with the UN at its core. It would also break new grounds in pursuing "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics", in keeping with the priorities of the 19th Congress of the Communist Party.

China Development Forum is a platform built by China to articulate its policies to the international audience. At a meeting of the forum, held in Beijing on 26 March this year in Beijing, Zheng Zeguang, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, elaborated on China's "distinctive major-country diplomacy" for the new historical context (Zeguang, 2018). The foreign policy of China is characterized by 'innovations in diplomatic theory and practice,' he said. The 'new era' calls for 'new missions and goals.' President Xi is himself guiding the emergence of foreign policy and diplomacy for the 'new era' in which, he claims, China will move 'closer to the center stage' and strive to make a significant contribution to humanity. The "major-country" relationship prioritises 'stability and balanced development' in China's relationships with other countries. Though it now appears a remote possibility, he also asserted that China would develop its relations with the US in a 'no-conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation' framework. Relations with neighbouring countries will be based on the principle of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness". China will strike a "proper balance between friendship and interests and the principle of sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith". The Belt and Road Initiative is the major Chinese innovation which is aimed at further opening the rest of the world to Chinese trade and investments and building a "community with a shared future for mankind". He also claimed that China will proactively participate in the reform of the global governance system. As China opens up and become proactive, it will take effective steps to protect its interests abroad.

Intellectual Rationalizations

Chinese scholars are busy developing the conceptual basis of rising China's 'new era' foreign policy. According to Xu Jin, a research professor at

the Institute of Economics and Politics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China is adding new guiding principles to its diplomacy for the 'new era.' (Jin, 2018) He identifies four such characteristics.

- a. **"Be enthusiastic and press on"**. According to this principle, a rising China will pursue more proactive foreign policy henceforth. This is a departure from Deng Xiaoping's dictum given several years ago namely keep a low profile and never taking the lead. This principle, which guided the Chinese policy for many years, is now being given up slowly. Some Chinese scholars feel that China today stronger than most countries except one. Keeping a low profile is no longer possible even if China wanted to. Others feel that keeping a low profile is a sound principle of enduring value. A middle course is being adopted, according to him. Keep a low profile when it is necessary and take the initiative when it suits.
- b. The other principal is what is being called the principle of **"bottom-line thinking."** This implies that while China will continue to rise and develop peacefully without being a threat to others, it would never give up its rightful interests. It will never compromise on its national security interests.
- c. The third principle is that of **"mutually beneficial cooperation."** China will share opportunities with other countries and share the benefits of its development. This principle has been promulgated to deflect the criticism that China has been a free rider of the international system from which it has gained tremendously, but it has never shared the responsibilities to sustain it. That is why one sees repeated assertions in Chinese statements on China's great contribution to peace and global development, building a community with a shared future for humanity and win-win cooperation. The Chinese hope that this will make China more acceptable to other countries and mitigate the fears of a China threat.
- d. The fourth principle of the new Chinese diplomacy, it is stated, is **"mutual consultation, joint construction, and co-sharing."** The Chinese theoreticians are saying that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced on March 28, 2015, jointly by the Chinese

National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce is the direct outcome of this principle. According to Chinese experts, the BRI has five aspects to it, namely, cooperation, adherence to the principles of UN Charter, harmony and exclusiveness, full play to market operations and win-win situation.

In the Chinese view, the world is facing three deficits, namely, on peace, development, and governance. Chinese diplomacy is geared towards bridging these deficits. China is promoting the establishment of new types of international relationships to achieve that. According to Chinese experts, The Belt and Road Initiative is a manifestation of China's new thinking.

It is for others to judge how sincere China is in abiding by these principles which seem fine as concepts but are problematic in implementation. Chinese experts are adept at developing all kinds of theories but looking at their behaviour, particularly in the South China Sea and at Doklam, one feels

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uneasy. The Chinese are unscrupulously following their national interest even if it is at the expense of others' but hiding the same behind high sounding principles. The Belt and Road Initiative, by which, the Chinese lay great store, is attracting many countries, but at the same time is also causing great concern to those for whom BRI is creating debt traps.

The Chinese view of the world is evolving. China today seeks to project itself as a defender of globalisation and international order as President Trump begins to reconfigure the international order constructed by his predecessors. The BRI is seen as a great Chinese contribution to world peace, stability, and development though many may not agree with this view. The Chinese have quietly taken over the disputed islands in the South China Sea and constructed military infrastructure there while ignoring the judgement of the International Court of Justice. This Chinese behaviour can easily be explained by the

principle of 'bottom-line thinking' which says that China will ever compromise on its core interests.

Reading the Tea Leaves

Whether there is anything new in the new strategy of Chinese diplomacy in the 'new era' is a matter of opinion but Chinese efforts to build its power in all its dimensions and use it to secure its own interests is outright power politics which most powerful countries have historically practiced with violent consequences. The Chinese devote considerable attention to analysing strategic challenges and opportunities. As China grows, the Chinese have come to the view that they would now play a more proactive role in the world affairs but would not dismantle the international system all at one go. At the same time, they will add newer elements to the international order that benefit China.

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They are closely watching the impact of Trump policies on the USA and the international order. They will adjust their policies as they go along. We should expect major adjustments in Chinese policies as the world becomes more uncertain and volatile. India needs to watch the evolution of Chinese foreign policy and innovation in its diplomacy. The Belt and Road Initiative has proved to be problematic for India due to sovereignty and debt-trap concerns. The BRI has been devised unilaterally and without consultations by the Chinese with others. Even today, authentic information is not available on how the initiative has progressed in different countries, including in Pakistan. But the Chinese are proceeding to build BRI projects in India's neighborhood despite the negative experiences of Sri Lanka in Hambantota port construction project, which has landed the country into a serious debt trap.

Chinese are likely to approach India in various ways – as a neighbour, as a major-country, as a competitor, as a partner, and as a potential BRI target country. Which conceptual formwork of Chinese diplomacy would apply to

India will depend upon the circumstances and context of bilateral relations. Rong Ying, the Vice President of the China Institute for International Studies, a think tank affiliated with the Chinese foreign office, has analyzed the so-called 'Modi doctrine' and its impact on Sino-Indian relations. According to the author, Modi has facilitated India's rise in global affairs through his personal style, leadership, and improved implementation of policy and aid programmes. India is offering the benefit of cooperation to its neighbours, strengthening the relationship with countries on its larger periphery and trying to become a 'leading force' in the Indo-Pacific region. The article expresses concern about India's growing partnership with the US and Japan and its potential negative impact on Sino-Indian relations. The Chinese are taking note of the pronouncements in India to the effect that India aspires to become a 'net security provider' in the region by strengthening maritime cooperation with countries in the Indian Ocean. India is also active on the issues of global governance. Under Modi, India's confidence in international affairs has "soared high." At the same time, India's diplomacy is a combination of "strength (and) morality" (Ying, 2018). The author feels that China's goals set out in the 19th party congress and Modi's vision of 'New India' are compatible. But both countries need to build mutual trust. He makes three suggestions (Rong 2018: 41-43): both countries should take a positive view of each other's development; they should strengthen developmental partnership with each other through better coordination, and they should promote cultural and people-to-people relations with each other. This way they will be able to manage their simultaneous rise. It is interesting to note that in this sanitized version of bilateral relations, the author does not mention the need to settle the long-standing boundary question which has been at the root of mutual mistrust between the two countries.

Nuances

India will need to understand the nuances of different frameworks of Chinese foreign policy in the 'new era'. Presently, India and China have a major boundary dispute. The Chinese have so far not shown keenness to clarify the

line of actual control nor are they ready for the eventual resolution of the problem. Their insistence that China will never compromise its core interests seems to suggest that they will continue to take a hardline on the territorial issue. At the same time, their pronouncements of building cooperation with 'major-countries' in a 'win-win' framework would suggest that they are interested in developing their bilateral relations with India. But their focus will be on strengthening developmental partnership, including in India's neighborhood. This is the signal coming out following the Wuhan informal summit between Modi and Xi Jinping in April 2018. China also seems to want cooperation with India in the BRICS framework. Chinese interlocutors would likely join hands with India selectively in the reform of the global governance

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system where the two countries seem to share some common interests. Thus, India-China relation will not follow a straight and predictable trajectory. Instead, the bilateral relationship will continue to remain complex, difficult and unpredictable. India

does not want a tense relationship with China, nor can it give in to the Chinese forays into its neighborhood that have strategic consequences. India will need sophisticated diplomatic approaches backed by economic and military strength to deal with the 'new era' China.

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