

# China's International Policy in the New Era<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: In the increasingly interconnected world of today, the boundaries between domestic and foreign policies are more fluid and penetrable as ever. The well-known and rather worn metaphor of the butterfly effect found an appropriate correspondent in the attention the world paid to the domestic event of the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China that convened in the autumn of 2017, as its decisions were expected to have an impact on the country's foreign policy as well. A New Era was defined within the The Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics that was included in the Party's constitution, together with the Belt and Road Initiative. Decisions adopted in the following months outlined what allows for identifying at least four characteristics – the Four C's – of China's thinking, with a particular focus on international relations: continuity; creativity; consistency; and comprehensiveness. How they underpin China's foreign policy seems to be crucially important in its understanding of the world order and, ever so more telling, for what it may consider of doing about it.*

*Key-words: China's foreign policy; a new world order; Belt and Road*

*JEL Classification: F, F01, F02*

## 1. Introduction

On October 18, 2017, the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) convened in Beijing against the background of developments, both domestic and foreign, that made it natural for the whole world to follow its proceedings and outcomes with utmost interest: China's growth process had been amazingly successful for over three decades at home and had brought about an increasingly visible Chinese footprint on global relationships. By the end of the year, China's GDP was to be US\$ 12.2 trillion – i.e. 4.3 times bigger than in 2006 (in current dollars), and projections were that China's share in the global GDP read 19.62% for the end of the first two decades of this century – as against 7.4% at the beginning of the second millennium [World Bank, 2017].

Against the background of these impressive figures and prospects, China's 'Long March to Power and Glory', to paraphrase the title of a 2013 best-seller, had entered 'a next stage' that largely coincided with the previous CPC Congress five years before. By the beginning of this decade, the size of China's economy had become second to the US economy only; 2012 was the year when the global financial and economic crises seemed to have tentatively embarked on the upward slope of their 'U' curve, with China outperforming virtually all other major economies – albeit at costs that were on the verge of the unbelievable; the first 'edition' of the Belt and Road Initiative was launched by the end of 2013; China's relations with countries in the East and South China Seas flared up both rhetorically and in militarily; and last, but not least, China's growth slid to single digits for the first time in decades, while the emphasis turned to qualitative, rather than quantitative concerns.

All of the above, and more, were included in 'The New Normal', which was a set-phrase in the Chinese narrative for a couple of years onwards. Its contents had more than one meaning: there was reassurance that normalcy – i.e. stability – in China was alive and well amidst an increasingly unstable global environment; there was emphasis on China's new status that was fundamentally based on the end of 'the long century of

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humiliation'; and there was commitment to implement 'China's Dream' of recovering the place it deserves under heaven.

At the same time, Change, with a capital 'C', seemed to be *the* key-word in the minds of the China watchers everywhere. The most important event in the life of the biggest political organization leading the most populous country in the world was expected to be a landmark in the record of the country's development beyond the customary significances of similar events. Decisions had been foretold that were supposed to bring about novelties in the top-tiers of the political management, in the management of the overall reform and, most probably, in China's foreign policy, since the global environment was clearly subject to dramatic trends at a scale, speed and complexity unseen for decades. 'Change' was, indeed, an opening concept: the very beginning of the report Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, delivered at the opening session clearly stated: '*Both China and the world are in the midst of profound and complex changes.*' Further in the report, the first paragraphs of chapter XII, which is dedicated to international politics, clarified China's outlook of how to deal with these changes: '*To make new and greater contributions for mankind is our Party's abiding mission. China will continue to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit and uphold its fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development*' (Xi, 2017d).

The messages these sentences convey, alongside with other significant assertions all around the document, were further elaborated in documents and decisions that followed the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress with a view to preparing and/or implementing the '*Centennial Goals*' by 2021 and 2049 respectively; likewise, they allow for identifying what could be called *the four C's* of China's political thinking: *Continuity*; *Creativity*; *Consistency*; and *Comprehensiveness*. While they relate to domestic *and* foreign policies alike, by no means are these *C's* the only defining attributes of the Chinese outlook; they also need to be examined as a whole that is the yield of intense interactions among them and with the wider environment of global realities.

## 2. Foreign policy with Chinese characteristics

**Continuity** is a key-concept of China's overall view of itself and it finds its natural place in the ideological backbone of the CPC. The Chinese discourse frequently refers to the 5,000 year-long continuity of its civilization on an area that has been more or less the same all this time. In terms of political sentencing, explicit links may be found in messages of the top Chinese leaders: '[...](W)e are all convinced that our work will go down in the history of mankind, demonstrating that the Chinese people [...] have now stood up' Mao said in September 1949 [Mao, 1949]; almost 70 years later, Xi Jinping said at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress: *The Chinese nation [...] has achieved a tremendous transformation: it has stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong [...]*(Xi, 2017d). Moreover, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' has been a fundamental concept for almost 40 years: Deng Xiaoping put it forward in 1982, at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC, at a time when vivid and passionate debates around what socialism meant were raging, particularly against the background of the ideological dispute between China and USSR. As Kissinger puts it, the 'Chinese characteristics' meant '*whatever was bringing more prosperity for China*' (Kissinger, 2011; Schell, Delury, 2013), and they are fundamental in turning China's Dream of Rejuvenation into reality.

The same continuity is strongly emphasized in home politics: The Four Cardinal Principles, which Deng postulated in 1979, are to be further upheld, while in foreign affairs '*China remains firm in its commitment to strengthening friendship and cooperation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence [...]*'(Xi, 2017d), which were adopted in 1954.

Continuity is subtly, yet clearly, present in the very language Chinese leaders resort to when delivering their messages. It is a rather common rhetoric rule to quote proverbs, sayings and samples of wisdom in official speeches and the Chinese discourse is relentlessly following this practice as the treasure of the Chinese civilization and culture is virtually endless. When addressing the opening session of the World Economic Forum at Davos, in 2017, Xi Jinping said: '*a line in an old Chinese poem goes, "Honey melons hang on bitter vines; sweet dates grow on thistles and thorns."*' as he approached the effects of globalization (Xi, 2017b). Wang Yi, State Councilor and minister of Foreign Affairs, found appropriate references in the Chinese wisdom when talking about specifics of China's diplomacy (Wang, 2018): in dealing with 'hotspots' in various places

in the world, he said *'Our approach is rooted in traditional Chinese culture [...]; about China's relationship with Japan: 'As a saying goes, never forget why you started, and you can accomplish your mission.'*; about the China-India relations: *'[...] the Chinese "dragon" and the Indian "elephant" must not fight each other, but dance with each other.'*; on China's cooperation with ASEAN: *'It is useful to heed the wisdom of a Chinese verse, "Green hills cannot stop the river flowing; to the vast ocean it keeps advancing."*

**Creativity** is mandatory, as new circumstances call for new approaches, both theoretical and practical. The Chinese reading of the 'new circumstances' include acknowledging well-known tectonic shifts in the international relationship among centers of power and, equally important, the spectacular upgrade in China's own global status.

The Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era makes it clear, among other things, that *'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations [...]*', said Xi Jinping at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress (Xi, 2017d, Beijing). References to the 'new type of international relations between major countries' had been made before – e.g., in the joint Chinese-French communiqué in 1997; in a speech Jiang Zemin delivered in Moscow in 2000; and in other official documents (Hankwon, 2013). However, the first years of this millennium provided a landmark in China's development of the concept, which seemed to have come of age.

A preview of the contents the new type of international relations had been made available in February 2012, during Xi Jinping's visit as Vice-President of China to the US, when he had outlined four orientations of further action in this field: mutual strategic trust; respect of concerns and interests of all parties; promoting win-win cooperation; and strengthening coordination and consultation on international and global issues (Xi, 2012). One year later, in the first visit abroad as President of China, Xi Jinping was quoted as saying in his address to the audience at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations: *'the trend of the times is so mighty and powerful that the best way to come to terms with it is to follow it, not go against it. And to keep up with the times, we cannot have ourselves physically living in the 21st century, but with a mindset belonging to the past, stalled in the old days of colonialism, and constrained by zero-sum Cold War mentality. The world community should jointly push for the building of a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation at the core, and people of all nations should combine their efforts to safeguard world peace and promote common development.'* (Xi, 2013).

The idea of the new international relations among major countries, which was somewhat absent in the Moscow speech, was to emerge later that year, during the informal Sino-American top-level dialogue at Sunnylands, California and it was rather detailed in the talks during President Obama's official visit to China, in 2014 (MFA, 2014).

The Chinese took great pains to prevent the perception of the concept of 'international relations among major countries' as an attempt to establish a 'China-US G-2' global formula of sorts. Hegemony had been anathema in China's stance ever since the ideological feud with the USSR and this outlook is strongly reinforced by the emphasis of China's status as 'a developing country' – albeit 'the largest one', as the official message runs. At the same time, sceptic views had been expressed quite a long time ago about the viability of a supposed 'G-2' formula: *'Even after 30 years of engagement, the United States and China still disagree about how the world should work. When there is agreement on the principles of global governance, more narrow economic interests or differences in political values typically make a common front elusive. And even when shared values and interests allow the two sides to move forward, the vast gap in governance and implementation capabilities often leads to mutual frustration and recriminations.'* (Economy, Segal, 2009). As for now, the issue seems to have been rendered moot after the US National Security Strategy of December 2017 viewed China as a 'strategic competitor' rather than as a partner.

Meanwhile, China's long-standing orientation has been to favour partnerships to alliances – an orientation Chinese scholars trace back to both the disputes with the USSR and the 'multidimensional diplomacy' of the 1990s (Feng, Huan, 2014). In January 2017, President Xi Jinping said that *'China is the first country to make partnership-building a principle guiding state-to-state relations. It has formed partnerships of various forms with over 90 countries and regional organizations [...]*', including the EU (Xi, 2017a). China's partnerships are built on the consecrated three basic pillars of the political dialogue; the economic cooperation; and the people-to-people relations; what makes it quite noteworthy, however, is the diversity of the labels and

flexibility in terms of institutionalization, actual contents and efficiency of said partnerships. Likewise, many of them have been either upgraded, or updated, or both, in keeping with the evolving interests of the parties concerned: with Russia: 1994 – *constructive partnership featuring good neighbourliness and mutually beneficial cooperation*; 1996 – *partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit and oriented toward the 21st century*; 2011 – *comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination*; similarly with France; 1997 – *comprehensive partnership*; 2004 – *comprehensive strategic partnership*; 2010 – *new, mature and stable comprehensive strategic partnership based on mutual trust and mutual benefit and with a global perspective*; 2014 – *close and lasting comprehensive strategic partnership* (Feng, Huan, 2014; Wenhui, 2015).

Alliances are considered ‘a thing of the past’ and an expression of Cold War thinking: ‘*We should [...] resolutely reject the Cold War mentality and power politics, and take a new approach to developing state-to-state relations with communication, not confrontation, and with partnership, not alliance.*’, the general secretary said at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress (Xi, 2017d). However, there are Chinese views that considered that ‘(t)he ordinary strategic partnership cannot consolidate the bilateral strategic cooperation as reliably as a military alliance. The fundamental difference between domestic society and international society is that there is no central government monopolizing military power in the latter. Thus, all states without enough military capability to protect their own security have to rely on a foreign military power or organization for the sake of survival.’ Said opinions further note that China’s rejection of alliances since 1982 has prevented it from setting up, or joining, such formats (Yan, 2015); the alternative is to promote partnerships instead and to follow a ‘*network strategy of embedded rise*’, as other Chinese scholars say (Xun, Liu & Ma, 2017).

In practical terms, The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may be considered a text-book example of creative thinking insomuch as it combines ‘chronic’ challenges abroad (need for infrastructure) and ‘acute’ problems at home (overcapacity, increasing development gaps). The corresponding multilateral institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, while not explicitly related to the initiative, is aiming to prove, *inter alia*, that a creative approach of existing rules in international investment and financing may actually improve the outcome of their implementation (see *infra*).

**Consistency** is to be understood here as bearing on the substance of policy decisions, which makes them virtually credible and implementable. Earmarking resources is obviously a must: e.g. the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018 is US\$ 9.49 billion – i.e. a 15.6% increase from a year before and 40% larger than in 2013. The same is true when the so-called ‘cooperation for development’ is concerned (to use the EU term) that, in China’s case, has witnessed both spectacular levels of allotted funds: between 2000 and 2014, the Chinese assistance was around US\$ 354.4 billion, coming close to the US assistance (US\$ 394.6 billion) during the same period of time (AidData, 2017). and, even more importantly, an institutional upgrade and streamlining of this line of action occurred with the establishment of the China International Cooperation Agency (Legarda, 2018; Lo, 2018). Just like in other cases, the Chinese aid for development of other states has a long history as proved by the “Eight Principles of Foreign Economic and Technological Assistance” that Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai enumerated during a 10-nation trip to Africa in 1963 and 1964.

There were other decisions of particular political relevance: the nomination of Wang Yi, the minister of Foreign Affairs, as State Councilor, while keeping the leadership of the Ministry; the promotion of Yang Jiechi, former State Councilor and minister of Foreign Affairs, to the ranks of the Politburo; the inclusion of Wang Huning among the seven members of the Standing Committee (the highest party structure) - an academic who used to work in Shanghai and whose ‘*greatest talent has been to translate the ideas of Chinese political leaders over three generations from the time of Jiang [Zemin] into pithy slogans and then to give these some theoretical basis and justification*’ (Brown, 2018); and the setting up of the Foreign Affairs Commission (Xinhua, 2018c) with the Communist Party of China Central Committee. This latter Commission is an heir of the former Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs and it ‘*should play the roles of decision making, discussion and coordination in foreign affairs*’, as Xi Jinping, who is heading the Commission, said at its inaugural meeting on May 15, 2018 (Xinhua, 2018c) meanwhile The United Front Work Department with the CC includes now the former Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and strengthens therefore the political component of its activities.

The list of institutional and political decisions bearing on China’s foreign policy would be incomplete without at least two further items: the first in terms of import and relevance is the ‘personal diplomacy’, as

illustrated by Xi Jinping's international agenda. Over 50 visits abroad in the five years between the latest two PCP congresses clearly highlight the particular increase of the political weight of China's actions – to say nothing about China hosting top-level sub-regional, regional and globally-reaching meetings (e.g. the 2016 G-20 summit in Hangzhou). Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative was included in the PCP constitution at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress, alongside with The Xi Jinping Thought – the first addition after the Mao Thought – which confers it the heaviest political weight in the party's overall actions aiming at implementing the China Dream.

Another most prominent example is the Silk Road Fund, which was set up in December 2014 with a total capital of US\$ 40 billion and CNY 100 billion; at the first summit of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in May 2017, President Xi Jinping announced that China's decision to add CNY 100 billion to the Fund.

**Comprehensiveness** is a feature that is inherent to the concept of the 'community of a shared future', which was first mentioned in the report to the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPC in November 2012. Xi Jinping further developed it in his first address to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (Xi, 2015), when he quoted '*an ancient Chinese adage: The greatest ideal is to create a world truly shared by all*'. Later on, in Geneva, he introduced China's proposal to '*build a community of shared future for mankind and achieve shared and win-win development*' and declared: '*To achieve this goal, the international community should promote partnership, security, growth, inter-civilization exchanges and the building of a sound ecosystem*' (Xi, 2017a).

The Chinese concept was included for the first time in a resolution adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC, 2017) on March 17, 2017, which prompted the Chinese official news agency to claim: '*By proposing the concept of "a community of shared future for all humankind" and a roadmap thereof, China has offered the Chinese wisdom and Chinese plan for solving major problems concerning the future of mankind. The concept of "a community of shared future for all humankind" is a fresh idea, featuring Chinese characteristics and the spirit of the time, initiated by China to reform and rebuild a world order, and a new top-level design to lead global governance*' (Xinhua, 2017c).

As mankind is in, and by, itself a comprehensive concept, the Chinese formula can hardly be otherwise – and even a cursory look at BRI, which is most talked-about and the single truly global one so far, would reveal the many-faceted approach that China is steadily promoting. 'Connectivity', as the key-word of the initiative (another 'C' concept), is rather comprehensive too, with its five domains: policy connectivity; infrastructure connectivity; trade connectivity; financial connectivity; and people-to-people connectivity (Xi, 2017c). The record of the development of the BRI is under continuous scrutiny as the number of events and projects have mushroomed virtually all over the place – including where the initiative is viewed with skepticism bordering apprehension and mistrust. A brief sketch of several defining aspects would suffice to highlight that there is more to this initiative that deserves the attention of policy-makers and analysts alike if solutions to the troubling issue of the vanishing world order are to be considered.

For starters, it took almost two years for the initiative to evolve from a proposal that seemed to focus mainly on bridging gaps *within* China's development to connecting said development to the *outside* world and become more comprehensive. 'Stepping carefully' on the stones to cross the river has been somehow updated in China's endeavours to include 'making the stones' on which to tread, and the Chinese approach emphasizes the learning from experience, both domestic and foreign, when advancing proposals for actions. The results, so far, include institutions and processes that are both new and wide-opened (in some cases), or selective in terms of scope and membership, but fostering a global reach nonetheless.

The above-mentioned Silk Road Fund, which is directly linked to the BRI, is a Chinese-only institution, with the participation of four state-owned partners: the State Administration of Foreign Exchange; China Investment Corporation; China Development Bank; and the EXIM Bank of China. It professes to respect universal standards and norms while it follows the laws and regulations of China and the host countries and '*has engaged in cooperation with multilateral institutions and platforms including the International Finance Corporation, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, etc. The Fund has also established extensive contacts with governments of over 30 countries and regions and with embassies, and consulates or representative offices of over 20 countries operating in China*' (Silk Road Fund, 2018).

A far more spectacular Chinese initiative than the Fund is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): with an approved membership of almost 90 countries, it ranks second behind the World Bank, which has 189 members. With US\$100 billion in capital, the AIIB is a medium-size regional development bank; however, its professed ‘clean, lean and green’ policy is enlightening for the ambitious goals – and so are the messages that Jin Liqun, president of the AIIB sent when delivering the opening address to the annual meeting of the Board of Governors in Mumbai in June 2018: *‘We must also revitalize the global economic institutions. The global economic order is precious, but imperfect. As developing countries increase their share of the world economy, they should have greater weight in the multilateral institutions. But, with greater weight also comes the responsibility to support them and take a lead role in reforming and financing them’* (Jin, 2018). Should AIIB take that lead, the most challenging part might be achieving the efficient ‘blend’ between what is perceived as ‘unfair Western-based regulations’ in the field and the ‘just approach’ as the Chinese messages constantly support (Gutner, 2018; Lichtenstein, 2018; Xinhua, 2018).

China’s comprehensive approach in its diplomacy includes the international legal field. On January 24, 2018, XINHUA announced that, following a decision of the Leading Group for Deepening Reform with the Central Committee of the CPC, *‘A dispute settlement mechanism which connects litigation, mediation and arbitration will be created on the basis of China’s current judiciary, arbitration and mediation agencies, and by absorbing and integrating legal service resources home and abroad [...]. Members of the group called for equal protection for both Chinese and foreign parties’ rights to create a stable, fair and transparent law-based business environment’* (Xinhua, 2018b). The next day, the daily *Global Times* quoted the director of an institute of international affairs in Beijing who alluded to the rationale of the Chinese decision and claimed that the current system to solve disputes is *“...complicated, time-consuming and costly. [...] It applied laws from Western countries and used English as the common language.”* (Global Times, 2018). Finally, on August 30, 2018, the spokesperson of China’s MFA stated: *‘Following [...] the Forum on the Belt and Road Legal Cooperation in July, the S[upreme] P[eople’s] C[ourt]’s International Commercial Expert Committee was officially established on August 26. [...] The BRI has entered a new phase of comprehensive and practical cooperation, the BRI legal cooperation is also placed at a new starting point’* (MFA, 2018).

The developments above were rather predictable in hindsight – e.g., in 2017 the theoretical journal of the CPC run an article that reads, *inter alia*: *“China has now become the world’s second largest economy, and is transforming the US-led international economic order through the “Belt and Road” through the transformation of free innovation and industrial structure, and partially withdrawing from the US dollar through the AIIB and RMB offshore settlement.’* (Lu, 2017).

### **3. Conclusion: the Chinese Characteristics and the World Order**

The big questions of whether, and how, the Chinese diplomacy ‘in the New Era’ shall act upon the world order have been doggedly accompanied by an unnerving dilemma: is China *upsetting* or *upgrading* the World Order? After all, abundant question marks hover about the very existence of that order and China’s view about it was succinctly put by Zhou Enlai when he told Kissinger in 1971: *‘All under heaven is in chaos, the situation is excellent’* (Kissinger, 2015); closer to our days, António Guterres, the UN Secretary General, thinks that our world *‘is in pieces’* (Friedman, 2018). Similar assessments have become rather a common-place in both official documents and analytical papers, but further elaboration on this particular issue is less warranted here.

During most of the first three decades of its incarnation as the People’s Republic in 1949, China had been fighting a World Order while heavily relying on ideological grounds. In China’s outlook, the ‘global chaos’ Zhou Enlai was referring to was embodied by the existence of the Three Worlds that were made up of the US and USSR; Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia; and ‘the Third World’ respectively, which included the rest (Mao, 1974). In 1974, Deng Xiaoping traced the roots of the chaos to the disappearance of the socialist camp as a result of ‘social-imperialism’ and the dissolving of the ‘Western block’ because of the ‘unequal capitalism development law’; Deng further elaborated on the ‘new contradiction’ between the first two worlds and the world of the developing countries, which were on their road to victory: the First World was marred by its antithetic contradiction between its superpowers, while the countries of the Second World were under various degrees of ‘abuse and threat’ from the former (Deng, 1974).

Then, for the last four decades, China's actions have been focused on a singular, unique and gigantic effort to accomplish a sort of pragmatic reconciliation between its own vision and understanding of self and a World Order that has proved to be rather beneficial. Now, China still heeds Deng's call, even if she no longer hides her strength – nor does China shy away from leading – but this only selectively, when and where it suits her 'core interest' in the first place. This attitude is relatively new – and novelties are inherently triggering doubts; however, merely taking a defensive-aggressive stand is bound to deepen these doubts and favour tensions, even conflicts and ultimately destruction.

However, the reality of China's performance so far, its status and potential and the '4 C's' as rather sketchily suggested above, may lead to several findings that, while seemingly obvious, are 'not necessarily less true', even if 'nothing is so treacherous than the obvious', like Schumpeter said.

As the list of the 'C's' is to be considered flexible and open-ended, the concept of *Communication* is to be added: dialogue is a key mode of action in China's messages, alongside with its persistent references to equality. At the same time, a huge challenge has to be overcome: to be viable, a global system needs more than economic, or military strength – it needs universal values that enjoy universal understanding and acceptance. The 'Chinese characteristics' are absolute in China's discourse; how they relate with 'specific characteristics' of the non-Chinese space is a matter of higher relevance than a mere philosophical or axiological debate. Under these circumstances, it seems but natural that intellectual contributions by all sides need to be greatly stimulated with a view to better explaining and understanding various, even opposite, points of view. Keeping an open mind goes beyond accepting The Outlook of the Other, at the same time with coming to terms with the need of updating one's beliefs.

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