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# **China's Foreign Policy in Xi's Era: Change and Continuity**

MEITING LI

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# China's Foreign Policy in Xi's Era: Change and Continuity

MEITING LI<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

One of the most notable foreign policy decisions China has made under the leadership of Xi Jinping was the Belt and Road Initiative, which has spanned the entire Eurasian continent and Africa. In addition, the world is also seeing a more powerful China with increasing proactiveness in key aspects of international life under Xi, characterizing a new generation of Chinese leadership. Xi's proactive approach in the international stage is in accordance with his vision of China's rise to the center of global economic life and in playing a bigger role in global governance. To better understand and explain China's series of bold foreign policy moves under Xi, this study seeks to explore what the Xi administration has inherited from the previous Chinese leaderships and where it has deviated in terms of foreign policy decision-making and instruments of implementation. It goes further to explore the possible rationale behind such continuity and change. It argues that it is the interplay of both the external and internal sources of China's foreign policy that has contributed to explaining the change and continuity in China's foreign policy under the Xi administration.

## KEYWORDS

Foreign policy, Xi Jinping, proactiveness, change, continuity

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## I. Introduction

The foreign policy of a state reflects its core interests and values in specific temporal and social contexts. Understanding the making and implementation of state foreign policy requires a closer look into the relative power position of the state in international structure so as to identify the state's key interests in relevance to other actors. It also asks researchers to take into consideration the prevailing international rules, norms, and institutions regulating state behavior, as well as inter-state relations, given the increasing constraints imposed by the multilateral arrangements in global politics. In other words, the making of a state's foreign policy cannot simply be regarded as an extension of the state's internal politics, but has to be understood in an interactive context featured by the complex interplay between the internal and the external, or the domestic and the international.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the analysis of China's foreign policy has to be conducted within this theoretical context.

Xi Jinping's presidency since 2013 has ushered in a new era for China. What has the Xi administration inherited from the previous Chinese leaderships and where has he deviated from them in terms of foreign policy decision-making (especially foreign policy principles and priorities) and instruments of implementation? A more important question that follows, however, is the rationale behind the continuity and change in China's foreign policy in the contemporary era, as well as its implications for the rest of the world. To this end, this research would focus on analyzing how the interplay of both the internal and external sources of China's foreign policy has contributed to explaining the change and continuity of its foreign policy.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013); Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Christopher Hill, *Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

## II. Theoretical underpinnings

Scholars have varied conceptions of foreign policy. This paper adopts Christopher Hill's definition that foreign policy is "the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually but not exclusively a state) in international relations."<sup>3</sup> China's foreign policy thus refers to China's official external relations with the other states, international organizations (governmental or non-governmental), and other foreign non-governmental actors, including private companies. That said, it should also be noted that foreign policy is not regarded as a one-way decision making process by the states (in this case, China). Rather, as Walter Carlsnaes famously argued, foreign policy is two-sided in nature, meaning the key factors constituting foreign policy always involve both internal and external dimensions. These factors include the environments, actors, interests, issues, and bargaining/compromise process of foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, it should also be pointed out that foreign policy action is not a self-deriving act by the state actors. But rather, action and structure are mutually constitutive.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, state actions are conditioned by the existing structures of different sectors and at different levels. On the other, state actions also affect the structure—either reinforcing or revising the existing structure, which in turn, re-informs state actors' subsequent actions. Therefore, foreign policy calculations and actions are not fixed but always take place in a dynamic international and domestic structure.

As mentioned above, foreign policy analysts have different approaches and models towards explaining foreign policy formulation and implementation. For example, Richard Snyder locates the decision-maker of state X at the center of foreign policy decision-making process while emphasizing the continuous interplay between

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<sup>3</sup> Hill, *Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, "The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1992): 245–70, doi:10.2307/2600772.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

the internal and external.<sup>6</sup> The internal setting includes the domestic non-human environment (i.e., geography, natural resources), society, human environment (i.e., culture and population), and social structure and behavior, including values, institutional patterns, social organization, group functions, etc. The external setting refers to the foreign non-human environment, other cultures, other societies, and foreign government action. The integration of such wide range of factors, according to Snyder, contributes to the explanation of state foreign policy action, reaction, and interaction.<sup>7</sup>

James Rosenau lists five sets of variables of a pre-theory of foreign policy analysis, namely the individual, the role, the governmental, the societal, and the systemic, whose importance ranks differently according to the geography and physical resource, the state of economy, and the state of the polity.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Rosenau argues that the individual variable, particularly the personal beliefs, values, and preferences, has the most determining impact on foreign policymaking of a large authoritarian, developing/underdeveloped state like China. Christopher Hill discusses the role of actors at the top and the need to lead responsibly. He also considers the role of agents (particularly of bureaucracies) and the need for coordination in bureaucratic politics.<sup>9</sup> Valerie Hudson argues that five levels of analysis need to be included in foreign policy analysis, including the individual decision-maker; group decision-making; culture and national identity; domestic politics; and the international system.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Hudson argues that the human decision-makers are the point of intersection between the primary determinants (material and ideational) of state behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making (Revisited)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> James N. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics, Vol. 2: Globalization and Governance* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Hill, *Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>10</sup> Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*.

<sup>11</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground



It is fair to say, in spite of variations in the specific elements included in foreign policy analysis models by different foreign policy analysts mentioned above, the common emphasis on the internal and external interplay can be easily identified. In the case of China, the external elements affecting China's foreign policy may include the international power distribution, the international institutional landscape, the international normative structure, the new global challenges, and the government actions of other states, particularly from the other major powers. Preliminary research has shown that China has been more involved in international institutions and more active in international norm/rule making. This also corresponds to China's perception of the current global politics, Xi's all-dimensional foreign policy thinking and his administration's official discourses in the domestic, regional, and global setting. China has been more upfront than ever in term of discussing, reinterpreting, and challenging the existing international order and norms primarily established by and for developed Western countries. Due to practical restrictions, discussions on the external would be brief whilst specific focus is given to the overall analysis of the Xi administration's perception of contemporary international relations as well as China's in relation to the outside world, which has a direct impact on China's foreign policy decision making.

Internally, the critical role of the decision makers, among the other internal variables in foreign policy decision-making, is indisputable, particularly in an authoritarian state like China. The focal discussion of the internal thus would be on the individual variable of Xi Jinping and the foreign policy principles of the Xi administration among discussions of China's other internal variables, such as economic, and political issues.

For the purpose of this paper, process tracing will be the main research method used to study the development of Xi's foreign policy thinking, the change and continuity in the Chinese official discourses

(key speeches), and one of the most important China foreign policy decisions—the Belt and Road Initiative. For practical restrictions, this research will rely on secondary data.

### III. The external: China in relation to the world

The external sources of a state's foreign policy do not simply manifest by means of their direct impact on state decision-making or the feedback loop they could create to inform subsequent action. Essentially, it is the state's interpretation/perception of the outside world, and its relations with the rest of the actors of the world that has a fundamental impact on the state's foreign policy decisions and action. In various official settings, President Xi Jinping and high-ranking Chinese diplomatic officials have publicly shared their perceptions and diagnosis of current international relations and China's identity in relation to the world, which have laid the foundation for China's foreign policy formulation.

First, the contemporary world, according to China, is featured by growing interconnectedness across different sectors and at all levels due to the deepening of globalization. As Xi pointed out in the 2018 Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, "China's development cannot be achieved without the world and the world also needs China for its development."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the world is no longer dominated by one super power, but characterized by multipolarity, particularly in the economic realm. Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister has repetitively emphasized that fact that China has been the biggest contributor to global economic growth since the 2008 international financial crisis.<sup>13</sup> China is "a ballast stone to stabilize the world

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<sup>12</sup> "Xi says China, the world cannot develop without each other," *XinhuaNet*, April 11, 2018, accessed October 31, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/11/c\\_137103519.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/11/c_137103519.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Wang Yi, "China's Role in the Global and Regional Order: Participant, Facilitator and Contributor," Speech at the Luncheon of the Fourth World Peace Forum, June 27, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1276595.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1276595.shtml).

economy,” and “the engine driving global growth.”<sup>14</sup> It is clearly demonstrated in official discourses that China has become aware of and is more confident about its economic power and importance at the global level. Unlike the past administrations, keeping a low profile at the global stage is no longer a strategy for China.

In the past 30 years, China has grown to become one of the most important economies in the contemporary world. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China had consecutively been the world’s biggest exporter and the second largest importer of goods from 2009 to 2016.<sup>15</sup> According to the European Commission, in 2016, China was the first trade partner to most countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, and West Africa.<sup>16</sup> It was also the third biggest trade partner of the United States and second largest to the European Union, which are the world’s two largest economies apart from China.<sup>17</sup>

However, it should also be pointed out that as China’s economic significance gradually transfers into political influence, its continual rise has become deeply and increasingly concerning for many other state actors. For example, while development loans and economic assistance from China help boost domestic growth, some developing countries are deeply worried about growing economic dependence on China. Major powers, particularly the United States, have demonstrated resistance for fear that China’s economic growth

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<sup>14</sup> Wang Yi, “Opportunities or Challenges, Partner or Rival,” Speech at the Council of Foreign Relations, September 28, 2018, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1602445.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1602445.shtml).

<sup>15</sup> “Direction of Trade Statistics - Exports & Imports Goods - IMF Data,” International Monetary Fund, n.d., accessed July 5, 2018, <http://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85&sid=1514498232936>.

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, *DG Trade Statistical Guide, June 2018* (Luxembourg: European Union, 2018), [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/may/tradoc\\_151348.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/may/tradoc_151348.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; “Top U.S. Trade Partners,” International Trade Administration, n.d., accessed July 5, 2018, [https://www.trade.gov/mas/ian/build/groups/public/@tg\\_ian/documents/webcontent/tg\\_ian\\_003364.pdf](https://www.trade.gov/mas/ian/build/groups/public/@tg_ian/documents/webcontent/tg_ian_003364.pdf).

would be a step towards its all-dimensional expansion, taking over the dominance of the Western world. Countries that have territorial disputes with China are likewise concerned that China's growing economic development has quickened the pace of its military modernization, making it more invincible in terms of traditional inter-state security. For democratic countries, the success of the China model has quite often been perceived as a threat to the existing international normative order, which was primarily established upon the democratic norms and values and has served particularly the interest of the democratic/developed West.

The Belt and Road Initiative, one of the best-known foreign policy decisions China has made under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is a typical example. It has been popularly regarded as the Chinese government's global economic strategy, encompassing majority of the Eurasia continent and its offshore areas. In a geopolitical sense, these areas are referred to as the core areas of what Halford J. Mackinder calls the 'Heartland' and 'World Island,' as well as the 'Rimland' areas described by Spykman, all of which are of great geo-strategic importance.<sup>18</sup> However, it has to be clarified that the nature of the Belt Road Initiative, as declared by China, predominantly promotes cooperation and connectivity rather than political or military expansion. Hence, the stated purposes contrast from the traditional geopolitical and expansive claims proposed by the rest of the world powers. That said, the aforementioned concerns from other states continue to rise and grow. It is only logical to assume that, as its economic growth continues, China has increasingly become a crucial factor included by other states in their foreign policy calculations.

Second, in addition to the economic realm, the Xi administration has also sought to actively engage with other aspects of global affairs. Globalization is a double-edged sword. In spite of the advantage it has

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<sup>18</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," in *The Geopolitics Reader*, eds. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge (London/ New York: Routledge, 1998); Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942).

brought, the intensifying international interactions and advancement of technology have also led to new conflict of interests, rise of trans-border problems and new global security concerns. China's diagnosis of these global challenges can be summarized as follows,

Our world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century: the surging trend toward multi-polarity, economic globalization, IT application and cultural diversity, accelerated transformation of the global governance system and international order, rapid rise of emerging markets and developing countries, and greater balance in global power configuration. The well-being of people in all countries has never been so closely intertwined as it is today.

On the other hand, we also face challenges unseen before. Hegemony and power politics persist; protectionism and unilateralism are mounting; war, conflicts, terrorism, famine and epidemics continue to plague us; security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, remain as complex and interwoven as ever.<sup>19</sup>

The solution that China provided is: first, advancing peace, development and win-win cooperation; second, fostering a new form of international relations and third, creating a community of shared future for mankind through five means, namely partnership (political), common security (security), common development (economic), inter-civilizational exchanges (cultural), and green development (environmental). This is considered to be the China answer to “the serious questions confronting the world.”<sup>20</sup> Some of the ideas proposed by China, although vague and subject to testing, have laid the necessary ground for China to play a more active

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<sup>19</sup> “Full text of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at opening ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit (I),” *XinhuaNet*, September 3, 2018, accessed October 31, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c\\_137441987.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c_137441987.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Wang Yi, Speech at the Opening of Symposium on International Developments and China's Diplomacy in 2017, December 10, 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1518130.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1518130.shtml).

role, or even to take a leading role beyond the economic sector at a global level. A few examples would be the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, joining the Paris Agreement, and bringing the Belt and Road Initiative in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. As Wang Yi remarked in 2014, China “has never been so close to the center of the world stage and has never before so fully participated in various kinds of international affairs or shouldered such important responsibilities for safeguarding world peace and development.”<sup>21</sup>

In Xi’s era, the world is seeing a more powerful China with increasing confidence in the key aspects of international life. Xi has been regarded as a new generation of Chinese leadership who takes a more assertive approach towards international relations compared to his predecessors. Unlike the previous administrations, Xi and his administration have stopped shying away from acknowledging China’s success, its major power status, and all-encompassing influence in different aspects of international society. “The China dream,” “the China model,” “the China solution,” and “the China answer” are terms that frequently appear nowadays in the discourses of high-level Chinese officials both at home and abroad.

Xi’s assertiveness and proactiveness at the international stage is in accordance with his vision of China’s rise to the center stage of global political and economic life, which requires China to play a bigger and more active role in global governance. Xi has also reinterpreted China’s national security as ‘comprehensive national security’ consisting of both traditional and non-traditional security issues which recognize no fixed boundaries. We are also seeing this new conception translate to the core national interests of China and be integrated in China’s foreign policy principles, guiding its foreign policy formulation and implementation. For example, Xi’s New Asian Security concept and Community of Shared Future for Mankind can

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<sup>21</sup> Wang Yi, Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of China Foreign Affairs University, September 2, 2014, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjzb\\_663304/wjzb\\_663308/2461\\_663310/t1188309.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzb_663304/wjzb_663308/2461_663310/t1188309.shtml).

be considered as the regional and global versions of his interpretation of the security architecture in contemporary international relations.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. The internal: Xi Jinping as the main architect of China's foreign policy

The China model, first and foremost, is characterized by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. More specifically, China's ultimate decision-making power in both domestic and foreign policies is arguably concentrated in the hands of the members of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee in Beijing, of which Xi is a core member. It has profound impact on the rest of the world in many ways, most directly in the area of economic development but also extending to many other significant realms. It is thus crucial that we consider the internal-external interplay when it comes to analyzing China's foreign policy. More specifically, this section looks at the individual variable of Xi Jinping, his foreign policy thoughts, and China's economic 'new normal'.<sup>23</sup>

Xi Jinping and his foreign policy thinking is both a demonstration of and a determining driving force for change in China's foreign policy. This is primarily displayed in his active head-of-state diplomacy and new foreign thinking. According to reports of China's state media, in Xi's first five years as Chinese president, he has conducted 28 state visits outside China, covering five major continents, 56 countries and

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "中国的亚太安全合作政策 (tr., China's Asian Security Cooperation Policy)," January 11, 2017, accessed July 5, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/tytj\\_674911/zcwj\\_674915/t1429766.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/tytj_674911/zcwj_674915/t1429766.shtml) (inaccessible as of June 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Xi Jinping, "Seek Sustained Development and Fulfill the Asia-Pacific Dream," Address to the APEC CEO Summit, November 9, 2014, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/ytjhzzdrsrlcldrfzshyjxghd/t1210456.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/ytjhzzdrsrlcldrfzshyjxghd/t1210456.shtml); "习近平首次系统阐述 '新常态' (tr., Xi Jinping systemically explains the 'new normal' for the first time)," *XinhuaNet*, November 9, 2014, accessed October 31, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-11/09/c\\_1113175964.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-11/09/c_1113175964.htm).

main international and regional organizations.<sup>24</sup> More than one third of Xi's destinations are China's neighboring countries and regions, demonstrating the priority consistently given to the neighboring states in China's foreign policy. On average, Xi spent more than one month per year on foreign visits during his first five-year term. This has made Xi the most active Chinese leader in terms of international participation by far.

By September 2018, Xi has hosted 7 major summits in China during his presidency, including:

- *The Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014.* The CICA aims to establish multilateral measures of confidence building to strength dialogues and cooperation, to promote peace, security and stability in Asia in areas including new security threats, economy, ecosystem and people-to-people exchange. In this conference, Xi put forward the idea of 'New Asian Security Concept' to promote comprehensive security cooperation.<sup>25</sup>
- *The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in 2014.* The theme of APEC Summit meeting 2014 was "building the future of Asia-Pacific partnership."
- *The G20 Summit in 2016.*<sup>26</sup> The summit addresses issues on international trade and investments, fiscal stimulus, innovative

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<sup>24</sup> “聚焦十九大: 习近平28次出访勾勒中国全方位外交图景 (tr., The 19th CCPNC Focus: Xi Jinping's 28 Visits Sketch China's All-Dimensional Diplomacy Picture),” *China News*, September 24, 2017, accessed July 5, 2018, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2017/09-24/8338753.shtml>.

<sup>25</sup> Xi Jinping, “New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation,” Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, May 21, 2014, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1159951.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml).

<sup>26</sup> “G20 - China 2016,” G20 Summit 2016 website, accessed July 5, 2018, <http://www.g20chn.org/English/index.html>.



means of economic growth, opposition to protectionism and populist attacks on globalization, support for refugees, etc.

- *The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BARF) in 2017.*<sup>27</sup> The BARF 2017 brought the stakeholders together in the discussion on the five areas of connectivity of BRI under the theme of “strengthening international cooperation” and “co-building the ‘Belt and Road’ for win-win development.”
- *The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Summit in 2017.* The theme was “BRICS: Stronger Partnership for a Brighter Future.” Meetings were held to improve partnerships in areas of world peace, common development, civilizational diversity, and global economic governance. Special focus was given to the developing countries.<sup>28</sup>
- *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in 2018.* The meeting covers various topic areas including security, cooperation, development, and the BRI. Member states also signed agreements and established substantive cooperation in the areas of security, economy, and people-to-people exchange.
- *The 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.* The leaders adopted the Beijing Declaration and an action plan to tighten ties, further economic cooperation, and to build a stronger China-Africa community with a shared future. China pledged US\$60 billion to Africa to finance local projects in the forms of investment, assistance, and loans.

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<sup>27</sup> “The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2017,” Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, accessed July 5, 2018, [http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt\\_ydyl\\_english/](http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt_ydyl_english/) (inaccessible as of June 2019).

<sup>28</sup> “Theme and Priorities,” BRICS Summit 2017 website, January 26, 2017, accessed July 5, 2018, <https://brics2017.org/English/China2017/Theme/>.

Despite the difference in membership, region, and nature, some common themes and goals of the above-mentioned organizations and summits can be identified particularly in terms of strengthening dialogues and cooperation and promoting shared peace, security, and stability through a multilateral setting. The examples given above also demonstrate China's growing willingness and interest in participating and leading world multilateral arrangements. The BAREF, being entirely China's creation, also shows China's initiative to establish new multilateral platforms, which correspond to its national interests and international common good of the Belt and Road countries.

In addition, it is also fair to say that there has never been any Chinese leader so outspoken about China's dreams, strategic plans, and global visions. This again marks a drastic departure from the 'keeping a low profile and bide one's time' principle underpinning Chinese foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping in 1980s. This is demonstrated by Xi's various landmark speeches during his foreign state visits or in his participation in summit meetings and world forums. Xi's foreign policy thinking consists of the major components listed below:

- *A new type of relationship between the major countries in the 21st century, or a new type of major-country relations (Pinyin: xinxing daguo guanxi, 新型大国关系).* The concept was originally introduced by Xi Jinping in 2012 in the context of Sino-US relations but has been further developed in a more comprehensive way to incorporate China's relations with Russia and the other major European powers.<sup>29</sup> The essential features of the new type of major-country relations are no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation.
- *A new type of international relations (Pinyin: xinxing guoji guanxi, 新型国际关系).* The new type of international relations

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<sup>29</sup> David M. Lampton, "A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.–China Ties," *Asia Policy*, no. 16 (July 2013): 51–68. doi:10.1353/asp.2013.0025.

is featured by no confrontation, win-win cooperation, and rejection of zero-sum game practice and winner-takes-all approach. It is considered to be the China answer to “where international relations is heading to.”<sup>30</sup> Four means are proposed to pursue a new type of international relations, namely: partnership (political), common development (economic), inclusiveness and intercivilizational learning (cultural), and security for all (security).<sup>31</sup>

- *A community of shared future for mankind* (Pinyin: renlei mingyun gongtongti, 人类命运共同体).<sup>32</sup> The concept of ‘community of shared future for mankind’ has a few precedent regional versions of which the origin could be traced back to the later stage of Hu Jintao administration. Officially, the concept was presented by President Xi Jinping at the UN General Assembly in 2015 against the backdrop of persisting unilateralism, zero-sum game practice, economic protectionism, growing trans-border problems, and lack of effective global governance.<sup>33</sup> Through this idea, China advocated a multi-pronged and coordinated global approach to

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<sup>30</sup> Wang Yi, “Toward a New Type of International Relations of Win-Win Cooperation,” Speech at the Luncheon of the China Development Forum, March 25, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1248487.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1248487.shtml).

<sup>31</sup> Wang Yi, “Building a New Type of International Relations Featuring Win-win Cooperation: China’s Answer to the Question ‘Where are the International Relations of the 21st Century Heading,’” July 1, 2016, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1376908.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1376908.shtml).

<sup>32</sup> Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Speech at the United Nations Office at Geneva, January 18, 2017, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq, accessed October 31, 2018, <http://iq.chineseembassy.org/eng/zygx/t1432869.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Creating a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Statement at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, September 29, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 31, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1305051.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1305051.shtml).

create a community of shared future for mankind, including establishing partnership (political), common/comprehensive/sustainable security (security), common development (economic), inter-civilizational learning (cultural), and green development (environmental). This is claimed to be the China answer/solution to the serious questions confronting the world. The concept was subsequently presented by Xi at various significant international settings, including the World Economic Forum 2017 and again the UN Office at Geneva in 2017. Since then, the term has started to gain its popularity at the international arena.

To a great extent, the above mentioned foreign policy ideas and thinking remain to be diplomatic lexicons and jargon given the vagueness and lack of convincing elaboration of achievable means. However, they do reveal the perception that the Xi administration has formed out of contemporary inter-state relations and the global environment. They also embody the long-term goals that China wishes to achieve through its foreign policy formulation and implementation. In the long run, these ideas could provide a general theoretical guidance for China's foreign policy and its relations with the other actors in future international interactions.

Albeit appearing more proactive and assertive, intrinsic to these foreign policy ideas and thinking is the prolonged China foreign policy principle dating back to Mao's time—'seeking common ground while reserving differences' (Pinyin: *qiu tong cunyi*, 求同存异). The purpose is to create an international space for the China model—the Chinese political system, Chinese way of economic development, and way of doing international relations. More specifically, it is to avoid major power conflict, to play down the China threat, and to create a peaceful regional and international environment conducive for China's continuous economic development and greater participation at global stage. China has long been repetitively claiming that it does not seek hegemony, expansion or global leadership, or revision of international order. However, it is what China is capable of rather than what it wants that constitutes a threat to the rest of the world.

To a certain extent, China no longer has an option of keeping a low profile because it has been put under the spotlight at the global stage.

On summarizing Xi's first five years as the highest leader of China and of the Chinese Communist Party, Wang Yi concluded that Xi's foreign policy thinking is developed on the basis of China's position in the history of international relations, with the aim of realizing the China dream of great state revival. Wang Yi added that Xi's foreign thinking also provides important diagnosis and strategy for China's foreign policy in the new context, working as guidance, basic principles, outlining the main tasks, providing the strategic tactics and institutional assurance for its diplomatic work. Moreover, Wang Yi specifically pointed out that Xi's foreign policy thinking has "scientifically answered the important questions of what kind of world and what kind of international relations that China—as a crucial member of international society—wishes to build; what kind of diplomacy China needs and how to do diplomacy in the new context."<sup>34</sup>

With the consolidation of Xi's rule after the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC) in 2017 and the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in 2018, it is anticipated that China's foreign policy making and implementation will have greater consistency and continuity in the near future. Since the 13th NPC, China's constitution and the domestic political structure have been reformed to pave the way for the Xi administration's long-term rule. This also means that Xi's foreign policy thinking and key foreign policy decisions (i.e., the Belt Road Initiative) will have a lingering, if not long-lasting, impact on China's policy towards and relations with the rest of the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Wang Yi, "在习近平总书记外交思想指引下开拓前 (tr., Exploring and Moving Forward under the Guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Thinking)," September 1, 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed July 5, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wj\\_b\\_673085/zzjg\\_673183/zcyjs\\_673189/jbzc\\_673191/t148\\_9118.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wj_b_673085/zzjg_673183/zcyjs_673189/jbzc_673191/t148_9118.shtml) (inaccessible as of June 2019).

## V. The internal: China's new normal

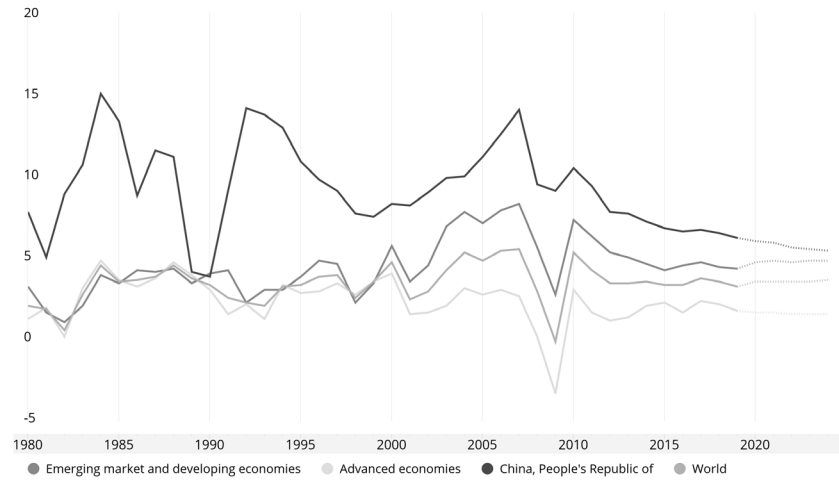
China has experienced about 30 years of rapid economic growth (see Figure 1 on page 19 and Table 1 on page 20). Its pace of economic growth has been consistently higher than the world average and even the emerging market and developing economies. Albeit experiencing a slowdown due to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, under the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012), China's economy has bounced back and consistently been on a steady and rapid rise, reaching the peak of an annual GDP growth of 14.2% in 2007. According to the data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China's annual GDP growth under the Hu Jintao administration was above 10% on average. Peace and development—a peaceful environment allowing the continuous growth of China's economy—was the dominant theme and top priority of China's foreign policy at that time.

A closer look into the graph and table shows that after reaching the peak of 14.2% annual GDP growth, China's economic growth had declined but remained above 9% annually. In 2012, the GDP growth dropped to 7.9%—the first time China's GDP growth dropped below 8% after it entered the 21st century. As shown by the graph and table, the number continued to drop steadily on an annual base although the pace of China's economic growth remains higher than the majority of world economies. The IMF projects that China's economic growth would continue to slow down in the next five years, dropping below 6% in 2022 (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Despite China's confidence in its economic development and the commitments to act as a global economic stabilizing actor, its economic slowdown has become a 'new normal'<sup>35</sup> and Chinese leaders have begun to explore means to tackle problems hindering its economic development. 'New normal' is a term used by Xi Jinping to describe the status of China's economic slowdown, demonstrated in three key features. In Xi's own words,

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<sup>35</sup> Xi, "Seeking Sustained Development."

**FIGURE 1** Real and projected GDP growth (annual percent (%) change), 1980–2023

Source: International Monetary Fund. 2018. World Economic Outlook (October 2018). Accessed December 12, 2018. [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO\\_WORLD/CHN/](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO_WORLD/CHN/).

A new normal of China's economy has emerged with several notable features. First, the economy has shifted gear from the previous high speed to a medium-to-high speed growth. Second, the economic structure is constantly improved and upgraded. The tertiary industry and consumption demand are becoming the main driver. Urban-rural and regional disparities are narrowing. Household income is going up as a percentage of national income. The benefits of development are reaching more people. Third, the economy is increasingly driven by innovation instead of input and investment. The new normal will bring new development opportunities for China.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, China is a much bigger economy than it was three decades ago. As Xi pointed out, China's increment in 2013 alone is equivalent to the aggregate of 1994. Maintaining the same growth rate would

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

TABLE 1 Real and projected GDP growth (annual percent (%) change), 2002–2023

	China, People's Republic of	Advanced economies	Emerging market and developing economies	World
2002	9.1	1.7	4.6	3.0
2003	10.0	2.1	7.0	4.3
2004	10.1	3.2	7.9	5.4
2005	11.3	2.8	7.2	4.9
2006	12.7	3.1	8.0	5.5
2007	14.2	2.7	8.4	5.6
2008	9.6	0.2	5.7	3.0
2009	9.2	-3.3	2.8	-0.1
2010	10.6	3.1	7.4	5.4
2011	9.5	1.7	6.4	4.3
2012	7.9	1.2	5.3	3.5
2013	7.8	1.4	5.1	3.5
2014	7.3	2.1	4.7	3.6
2015	6.9	2.3	4.3	3.5
2016	6.7	1.7	4.4	3.3
2017	6.9	2.3	4.7	3.7
2018	6.6	2.4	4.7	3.7
2019	6.2	2.1	4.7	3.7
2020	6.2	1.7	4.9	3.7
2021	6.0	1.7	4.9	3.6
2022	5.8	1.5	4.8	3.6
2023	5.6	1.5	4.8	3.6

Source: International Monetary Fund. 2018. World Economic Outlook (October 2018). Accessed December 12, 2018. [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/CHN/](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/CHN/).

be enormously challenging, if ever possible. However, problems have emerged that have to be dealt with to ensure China's healthy economic development and the world economic development at large given the growing interdependence between the world economy and the importance of China's economic performance. Economic structure, domestic demand and regional development imbalance are among



the top economic problems that China needs to solve. In 2014, the Chinese Communist Party established a new Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, headed by Xi Jinping. A top priority of this central leading group is to deepen economic reform specifically. In March 2018, this central leading group was further institutionalized to a commission, displaying the significance of comprehensive deepening reform in contemporary China.

To comprehensively deepen reform, the Xi administration points China to three main ways: stimulating market vitality, innovation-driven growth, and further opening up its economy, including the service sector. China's foreign policy answers to deepening reforms in this regard include:

- (1) Continuing the proactive business strategy of 'going out and bringing in,' meaning, to further encourage Chinese investments overseas to explore wider external markets and to bringing more foreign investments in to the Chinese domestic market.
- (2) The Made in China 2025 which aims to upgrade China's industry by focusing on high-tech advancement. This has aroused a lot of controversy at the international level given the fact that technology, particularly artificial intelligence, has become an essential component of national security. More importantly, as China's fast growing technological capacity challenges the US dominance in this field, it has also led to the rise of grave concerns in the US government, which underlies the on-going US trade war against China.
- (3) The most important of all is the Belt and Road Initiative (B&R for short). The B&R—previously known as One Belt, One Road—was put forward at such a historical point in time, characterized by unprecedented level of global interconnectedness. It is an all-encompassing initiative proposed by the Xi administration to form a global network of state cooperation through the establishment of tangible and intangible connectivity with the aim to achieve common development and to solve China's development problems.

The top five cooperation priorities are policy coordination, facilities connectivity (particularly infrastructure building), unimpeded trade and financial integration.<sup>37</sup>

Internally, the B&R is in accordance with the China dream of national revival given the economic cooperation opportunities and the ‘going out and bringing in’ of the business sector. It also addresses the domestic economic structural concerns since it allows the Chinese industrial sector to seek potential overseas market, so is the case with the fast-growing hi-tech field (i.e., Huawei). The B&R also allows the opening up of more Chinese regions, particularly the western provinces in China. This might also help alleviate the significant east-west development gap within China. According to the 2018 Big Data Report on Trade Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative released by the National Development and Reform Commission, although the total trade volume of China’s western region with the B&R countries only takes up 10% of the total trade volume, the growth rate of the western region’s trade with B&R countries has reached 15.6% from 2016 to 2017, surpassing the 13.1% growth rate of the eastern region, which still takes up 79.8% of the total trade volume.<sup>38</sup>

The B&R also opens up more possibilities for international coordination which could in turn enhance global governance. Since 2016, China has started to cooperate with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to bring the B&R in line with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. The four areas of engagement include: policy support and evidence-based research; sustainable investment and finance; country

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<sup>37</sup> “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” *Belt and Road Portal*, March 30, 2015, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, *Big Data Report on Trade Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative 2018* (Beijing: State Information Center, 2018), <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydyIgw/201805/201805080457024.pdf>.

engagement and capacity building; and partnership and networks. In this regard, the B&R is also in accordance with Xi's foreign policy thinking of creating a community of common future for mankind.

The B&R has quickly become a global buzzword since it was announced. On the one hand, its membership has fast expanded to include states in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. Robust discussions on the opportunities and possibilities of the B&R has dominated scholarly work and the business world. On the other hand, doubts and criticisms have also quickly emerged about China's intention and the potential pitfalls the B&R might pose. Entering its sixth year, the B&R has presented the world with achievements, yet its sustainability remains to be tested.

## **VI. Conclusion: Change and continuity**

To conclude, China's foreign policy under the Xi administration has demonstrated both change and continuity. The change and the continuity could only be understood and explained by delving in the complex interplay between the internal and the external foreign policy elements.

The continuity of Xi's foreign policy is demonstrated in its adherence to the fundamental principles that have consistently underpinned China's foreign policy, namely independent foreign policy and peaceful development. Even some of Xi's new era thinking has its origins from the later stage of the Hu Jintao administration, such as the community of shared destiny and the community of shared future for mankind. Foreign policy priorities largely remain the same, albeit taking different forms. Peace and development are still the main goals of the Chinese government as it seeks a peaceful international environment to continue its economic development at a global stage.

To argue there is also change in China's foreign policy in Xi's era is not to say that there is necessarily drastic departure from the previous administrations. Rather, change here is referred to as dynamic and further development. The fact that China is featured by one-party rule has ensured a great extent of policy consistency and continuance. In Xi's era, the leadership has taken a more proactive, more confident and more vocal approach towards global politics. Internally, the Xi administration has actively sought comprehensive reform at all dimensions, spanning from party level to state level, from political to institutional, technological and economic sectors. Externally, the Xi administration has created a clearer Chinese identity at world stage as the Chinese leader and officials become more vocal about the Chinese perception of the world and China's answer and solution to world problems. The conceptualization of new foreign policy thinking and ideas, albeit having primarily been diplomatic lexicons and jargon, has shown that the Chinese government is more aware of the importance of framing world issues and agenda, hence, becoming a more active participant in forming and shaping key international discourses in a dynamic global environment. Overall, China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping is more globally driven and more responsive to the change of both domestic and global dynamics.

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