

Nele Noesselt (Ed.)

# Reassessing Chinese Politics

National System Dynamics  
and Global Implications





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## National System Dynamics and Global Implications

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## Abbreviations

13.5	13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development
A2/AD	Anti-Access and Area Denial
ACMECS	Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ACLA	All-China Lawyers Association
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ARATS	Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CC	Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
CCGO	Central Committee General Office
CCICED	China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CLMV	Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
CPC	Communist Party of China
DPP	Democratic Progress Party
DWP	Defense White Paper
EPL	Environmental Protection Law
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
GHGE	Greenhouse Gas Emissions
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
GONGO	Government-organized Nongovernmental Organization
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Communications
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
KMT	Kuomintang
LMCM	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism
LMI	Lower Mekong Initiative
MGC	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation
MEE	Ministry of Ecology and Environment

MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MSF	Marine Surveillance Force
NDB	New Development Bank
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NPCSC	National People's Congress Standing Committee
NSA	National Security Agency
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence
PBOC	People's Bank of China
PLA(N)	People's Liberation Army (Navy)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RWB	Reporters Without Borders
SCGO	State Council General Office
SCS	Social Credit System
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEF	Straits Exchange Foundation
SEPON	SEPON Ltd. (Tanzanian Renewable Energy Developer)
SSBNs	Ballistic-Missile-Carrying Submarines
SSRFAB	South Sea Region Fisheries Administration Bureau
SLOCs	Strategic Sea Lines of Communication
TPSN	Territory, Place, Scale, Network
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US	United States



## Chapter I: Introduction: Reassessing Chinese Politics in the Twenty-First Century<sup>1</sup>

Nele Noesselt

### Introduction: Post-Hegemonic Future?

In the aftermath of the 2007/2008 mortgage and credit crisis in the United States, leading pundits of world politics were predicting a further tangible weakening of the US-centered world order and a power shift toward the rising economies of the so-called Global South:

“There is no longer any question: wealth and power are moving from the North and the West to the East and the South, and the old order dominated by the United States and Europe is giving way to one increasingly shared with non-Western rising states. But if the great wheel of power is turning, what kind of global political order will emerge in the aftermath?” (Ikenberry 2011: 56)

The general threat scenario among observers based in the US and Europe was the emergence of an illiberal script of global order (Boyle 2016). The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was perceived as the most powerful and likely challenger to US supremacy and to the institutional settings established after World War II (see, among others, Jacques 2012). These scenarios are inspired by models of power transition theory (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980) derived from the ex post interpretation of the rise and fall of hegemonic powers.

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<sup>1</sup> The editor and the authors would like to thank Tectum (especially Ms Eleonore Asmuth) for their excellent support of this book project. Special thanks also to Saina Klein and Tobias Schäfer who coordinated the final editing, and Dr Giulia Romano and Elizaveta Priupolina for checking the final versions of all texts and graphs.

Elaborating on these realist interpretations, Robert Gilpin (1981) looked at leadership cycles and argued that the material capabilities of a state to establish “international” institutions should be regarded as the starting point for the construction (or consolidation) of hegemonic order(s). This would imply that rising powers design their distinct alternative institutions in opposition to the existing system settings and seek to win strategic majorities for their world order visions. However, as Gregory Chin (Chin 2010: 85) has convincingly argued, the PRC’s rise was facilitated and catalyzed by its integration into existing international institutions and multilateral frameworks—reflecting the ordering principles of “Western” neoliberalism. Instead of behaving as a revisionist power, Beijing, according to Chin’s analysis, has been seeking to expand its influence within these institutional settings and to initiate a smooth transition toward multipolarity. These observations lead to the interpretation of potential power shifts from one hegemonic player to an alternative power center as being more gradual in nature.

These power centers can be composed of one predominant state or of groups of like-minded actors with overlapping policy preferences and compatible world order visions. Ideas and policy paradigms thus do play a central role in the (re)making of the global order. The black-and-white division of governance visions along the lines of liberal versus illiberal ideas, the latter exclusively associated with nondemocratic actors, is hardly illuminating. Some scholars have hence engaged in an excavation of policy paradigms dominating elite mind maps beyond the West, or looked at the formation of networks (such as the BRICS or BISAM) (Cooper 2010) and at their efforts in setting up joint institutions (such as the BRICS New Development Bank, NDB, or the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB). The tantalizing question is whether the regional and global institutions inaugurated by these non-Western, nondemocratic players will have distinct features and, in the long run, seek to establish an illiberal script as their overarching frame of reference and guideline for world politics. Or, will the rise of new actors and their institutions ultimately simply result in the replacement of the old gravitational center(s) of world politics while repeating the former hegemon’s organizational structures and patterns of interaction?

Socialization theories had departed from the normative assumption that the inclusion of rising powers in established institutional settings would trigger a learning process, causing an internalization of given policy paradigms—and ultimately leading to a consolidation and reiteration of the old order. The PRC’s accession to international institutions and organizations has, however, neither resulted in regime transformation

nor in silent acceptance of the given US-centered order. Positioning itself as an “advocate” of the Global South, the PRC is pushing for a redistribution of voting rights inside international organizations in order to upgrade the bargaining capacities of non-Western states. This behavior has become quite discernable at G20 meetings and in related multilateral fora on the regulation of global trade and finance (for an overview: Kirton 2016).

The visible gains in the economic and monetary power capacities of rising economies—headed by the PRC, which now ranks as the number two economy in the world after the US—might imply a partial change of direction in processes of policy transfer and transregional socialization. If these actors are following distinct policy paradigms, their participation in the reforming of existing institutions and their setting up of institutions with a regional or global reach could result in a partial exchange or modification of the conceptual underpinnings of world order in the twenty-first century. Examining China’s role and actual behavior in international institutions, Alastair Iain Johnston (2008) differentiates between three specific microprocesses of socialization: mimicking, persuasion, and social influence.

Mimicking best describes the behavior of states in the early stages of their joining existing international institutions. It “explains pro-group behavior as a function of borrowing the language, habits, and ways of acting as a safe, first reaction to a novel environment” (Johnston 2008: xxv). Social influence, meanwhile, “explains pro-group behavior as a function of an actor’s sensitivity to status markers bestowed by a social group and requires some common understanding in the social value the group places on largely symbolic backpatting and opprobrium signals” (Johnston 2008: xxv). Persuasion “explains pro-group behavior as an effect of the internalization of fundamentally new causal understandings of an actor’s environment, such that these new understandings are considered normal, given, and normatively correct” (Johnston 2008: xxv–xxvi).

The time frame that Johnston focused on was the years of the 1980s, the early post-Maoist reform period, up to the year 2000—when China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since then, domestic conditions as well as external constraints have undergone tremendous reconfigurations and changes. The increase in China’s economic and monetary power has strengthened its international bargaining position—hence leading to a shift from it being a rule-taker to becoming a rule-maker (Zhou and Esteban 2018), or at least a rule-transformer. The PRC’s positioning in the renegotiation of the international institutional order is linked to two dilemmas and defects of

world economics (and politics): The 2007/2008 crises in the US and Europe are referenced by Chinese politicians in order to stress the efficiency deficit and lack of functionality of the specific (neoliberal) variety of capitalism serving as the anchor and conceptual yardstick of US-dominated international institutions of trade and finance. In addition, China operates as the spokesperson and advocate for the states of the Global South and stresses the lack of legitimacy of international institutions—as deriving from the relative underrepresentation of non-G7 states therein. The reform proposals put forward by Chinese leaders since 2007/2008 tend not to seek to overthrow the established order, but rather to increase the participation rights and discursive power of states beyond the G7 world. Along these lines, Tang Shiping predicts the emergence of “overlapping regionalisms” and the formation of a global order with actors beyond the traditional nation-states (Tang 2019).

While all these trends have been analyzed and discussed in connection with the scenario of an inevitable power shift from North to South and West to East, the agency of the “old” power centers in consolidating their leadership positions should not be overlooked. By resorting to protectionism and by reactivating alliances, these old centers are pursuing their own strategies to establish a partially revised international order in which they can still secure their own national (or regional) interests. While Deudney and Ikenberry (2018) postulate that the liberal order will ultimately prove resilient enough to survive the rise of new powers, they do not, however, address the question of what the refined version of “liberal internationalism” in the twenty-first century might look like in terms of power distributions, key patterns of interaction, as well as its moral-ethical fundaments.

If there is a connection between the leading powers’ domestic governance patterns and world order conceptions spreading since 2007/2008, it might prove crucial to open up the “black box” of the assumed main competitor to US predominance, the PRC. Diving below the surface of normative-ideological classifications by international China watchers as well as political-diplomatic justificatory (counter)statements put forward by Beijing’s fifth generation of political leaders may turn out to be very revealing.

### **China’s Silk Road Dreams**

The analysis of the PRC’s foreign relations often operates with a clear dividing line drawn between ideology-based Maoist politics on the one

side and post-1978 pragmatic approaches to world trade and global affairs on the other. This latter is further complemented by the identification of an assumed “grand strategy” determining Beijing’s approach to world politics: a refined Chinese development strategy with a global reach first launched in 2013, the “New Silk Road”—also known as “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) or “Belt(s) and Road(s) Initiative” (BRI)—fuels the perception of the world having entered the final chapter of an inevitable power struggle between the US and China for global supremacy.

A closer look at China’s BRI, however, illustrates that these scenarios are simply unrealistic and do not reflect the current (or prospective) global constellations, which are overshadowed by mutual vulnerability and multilateral interdependencies. According to the official narrative of the BRI’s genesis, as recounted by the Chinese side, it was in 2013 that Xi Jinping first sketched out the cornerstones of this global initiative. This was done in his speech at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan (September 2013), where he elaborated on the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (Xi 2013a), and during his visit to Indonesia (October 2013), where he outlined the idea of a “maritime Silk Road” (Xi 2013b). Since then, the Chinese government has spared no efforts in promoting the BRI as a win-win opportunity for joint development and global prosperity. In 2015 the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce jointly released an “Action Plan” on the New Silk Road initiative, a global connectivity blueprint covering about 55 percent of global gross national product, 70 percent of the global population, as well as 75 percent of worldwide energy reserves (NDRC 2015). Two new institutions have since been established to finance BRI-related projects: the Silk Road Fund<sup>2</sup> and the aforementioned AIIB (see also, Yu 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The active positioning of the PRC on issues of global development and its investment in (and realization of) large-scale infrastructure projects in other world regions generate, however, major concerns and great unease among international observers. By granting unconditional loans and credits, the PRC emerges as a challenger to the policies and regulations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which link the granting of financial support to the compliance with and fulfillment of good governance criteria. Furthermore, as the

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enweb/23773/>.

<sup>3</sup> See the list of approved projects provided by the AIIB: <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/index.html>.

PRC does not evaluate the ability of the borrowing government to eventually repay its debts, this increases the risk of new debt traps for weak and underperforming economies. While nonperforming loans might, in the long run, have negative implications for China's domestic financial and banking sectors, the general perception is that these financial dependencies increase the PRC's global influence—and especially in less-developed parts of the world. Sri Lanka, unable to repay its BRI debts, reportedly had to sublet its strategic port infrastructure to the PRC, hence fueling new threat perceptions of a Chinese global takeover (Hurley et al. 2018).

Chinese observers and advisers to the national government are aware of the potential impact of China's regional and global activities being viewed dimly, as this could trigger the formation of counter-alliances resorting to containment measures. This might explain the time and effort spent on the construction of a positive narrative vis-à-vis the BRI, framed as a win-win opportunity in the name of a “global community of shared destiny.” Despite reports about anti-Chinese riots and labor protests in African copper mines, according to the Afrobarometer the perception of China, on average, is highly positive compared to the roles and images ascribed to other (former colonial) powers. This could also be the result of the PRC's financing of highly symbolic projects, such as the headquarters of the African Union or the provision of school buildings, libraries, and stadiums.<sup>4</sup>

In connection with the readjustments made to the PRC's official foreign and security strategies under Xi since 2012/2013, Beijing has also refined its strategic approaches to its neighboring states—with a special focus on Central as well as Southeast Asia. These reflections have been summarized under the label of “new neighborhood diplomacy” (*xin zhoubian waijiao*) (Swaine 2014). Along these lines, the PRC has not only intensified its cooperation with the region via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but also reached an agreement with Russia regarding the “linking” of China's New Silk Road and the Eurasian Economic Union promoted by Moscow (Kaczmarek 2017). In addition to these regional projects, the reconfirmed official encouragement of Chinese companies and banks to “go out”—that is, to open branches overseas and to invest abroad—has not only increased the PRC's global economic and monetary power, but also created security dilemmas and vulnerabilities previously unknown.

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<sup>4</sup> On China's activities in Africa, see the volume edited by Chris Alden and Daniel Large (2019).

The Chinese government sees itself being forced to take a position on issues of peace and stability beyond its own borders. In 2013 the White Paper on “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces” (Information Office of the State Council 2013) formulated that China’s regional and global security environment had witnessed major changes and that the restructuring of the Chinese armed forces would hence be a necessary adaptation and structural readjustment. While the focus relied on domestic and regional security challenges, the document also stated that “the security risks to China’s overseas interests are on the increase.” The revised tasks and missions of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) also included a shift to the “concept of comprehensive security” and the ability to “effectively conducting military operations other than war [MOOTW].” The document also undertook an ex post legitimation of the overseas deployment of China’s naval forces by widening the list of international tasks and duties. While the PRC has a long history of contributing noncombat forces to United Nations’ peacekeeping missions, active calculations made about the protection of China’s “overseas interests” mark a significant departure from previous strategies:

“With the gradual integration of China’s economy into the world economic system, overseas interests have become an integral component of China’s national interests. Security issues are increasingly prominent, involving overseas energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and Chinese nationals and legal persons overseas. Vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue have become important ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests and fulfill China’s international obligations.” (Information Office of the State Council 2013)

Under the fifth generation, not only the range and scope of PLA missions but also the underlying foreign and security policy principles themselves have undergone major changes. In 2015 the PRC released a White Paper entitled “China’s Military Strategy” (Information Office of the State Council 2015), which replaced the former white papers on national defense—indicating a significant shift in focus toward regional and global affairs. China’s military strategy includes security issues in cyberspace, outer space, as well as overseas. The turn to the latter finally triggered the transformation of the Chinese maritime forces into a “blue-water navy.” China’s activities in Africa include participation in UN peacekeeping operations, escort missions in the Gulf of Aden, contributions to antipiracy endeavors, the setting up of a naval base in

Djibouti, bi- and multilateral military cooperation and arms sales, as well as crisis management. The latter is both with regard to the evacuation of Chinese nationals from crisis regions in Libya and Sudan as well as vis-à-vis mediation between warring parties, as in South Sudan. Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping missions have been one of the most visible elements of the country's security strategy. With the Mali and Sudan peacekeeping missions China also started to send combat troops and an infantry company. In 2015, in his first speech at the UN General Assembly, Xi declared that China would contribute additional 8,000 soldiers to UN peacekeeping (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2015).

The emergence of the MOOTW concept in official Chinese foreign policy documents seems to indicate a general shift of perception toward a broader configuration of security. Furthermore, since 2002 the PRC has officially started to operate with a "new security concept" that also calculates nontraditional security issues (both at the domestic level as well as in the global realm). While scholarly debates among Chinese epistemic communities have attentively followed the international debate on human security (Breslin 2015), the PRC's political leaders seem rather committed to a state-focused approach to security. Given the perceived potential spillover effects of religious extremism as well as separatism on the one hand and transnational risks such as economic and financial crises and deadly viruses on the other, the PRC's more recent actions and positioning papers have, however, slightly shifted to take a more flexible approach to these novel dimensions of security. With regard to the announced global extension of Beijing's BRI project, Dellios and Ferguson (2017) even go as far as to argue that the capability of the PRC to frame this initiative in terms of socio-ecological human security will be the core necessary precondition for its final success.

A closer look at the origins of the PRC's New Silk Road initiative clearly evidences that China's global financial and infrastructure activities are largely driven by domestic development needs (Summers 2016). The perceived increased vulnerability of the Chinese economy by crises in the US and Europe, in combination with domestic developmental challenges, has triggered a strategic re-steering of the Chinese political economy. The idea is to catapult Chinese industry from a supply, export-oriented economy to a global center of technological innovation by 2030. The strategy paper "Made in China 2025,"<sup>5</sup> issued by the

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese version is available online at: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-05/19/content\\_9784.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-05/19/content_9784.htm).

Chinese State Council, illustrates the idea of establishing Chinese companies as “global champions” in the fields of high-tech products. Rising production costs in China and higher socioecological production standards have caused a partial outsourcing of production chains—leading to the opening of branches and production sites of Chinese companies in Africa and Latin America. Moreover, the overcapacities in China’s infrastructure-construction sector, the surplus of currency reserves in combination with the idea of a controlled internationalization of the Chinese renminbi imply that the BRI is part of a strategy to re-stabilize the Chinese domestic economy by securing global contracts along the New Silk Road’s corridors. China’s domestic development strategy operates on the basis of the building of strategic metropolitan economic clusters, which these corridors connect to strategic transportation hubs—such as the deep-water port in Gwadar (Pakistan).

Control over the surrounding waters in the East and South China Sea is regarded as a core issue of national security. The US “pivot to Asia,” the increased presence of the US military in the region, and the US’s signing of security alliances with China’s close neighbors have changed the security parameters for Beijing. While the US officially guarantees and defends Taiwan against any potential attack from the mainland (Taiwan Relations Act), it has also positioned itself as a security player in the dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands (2012) (Zhao 2018a) as well as in the maritime conflict between China and the Philippines. The latter was formally settled by an arbitration award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016, stating that the PRC’s “nine-dash line” and related territorial claims in the South China Sea had no legal basis—thereby confirming the claims over certain islands and territorial waters put forward by the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> The PRC, however, did formally not accept the Court’s final verdict.

Border-crossing rivers are another arena wherein international and domestic legal principles collide. The Mekong cooperation agreements are, however, a quite positive example of shared regulation efforts (Biba 2018). One highly under-researched issue is the large-scale infrastructure project to redirect water from China’s southern provinces to the semi-arid areas in the north of the country and to the metropolitan cluster Jin-Jing-Ji (still under construction), connecting the harbor city Tianjin with Beijing and parts of neighboring Hebei Province. As the south-

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<sup>6</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration (2016), PCA Case No. 2013-19. Available online at <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf>.

north canal project might have severe implications for the Pearl River delta, around which China's leading industrial centers are clustered, there are additional plans to refill China's southern streams by channeling water from other sources and rivers—with potentially significant implications for trans-border rivers and the water supply of the PRC's southern neighbors. In addition, China's domestic Silk Road connectivity program includes the building of bridges and underwater tunnels directly connecting Hong Kong and Shenzhen with the mainland shores of the Pearl River delta, fueling the supply of the PRC's leading industrial and commercial centers in the east (Wang, Jia 2017). As these projects will run through earthquake-prone areas, their construction might have severe long-term implications for the region and its surrounding natural environment.

The building of regional and global connectivity networks of maritime and land-based transportation routes is only one dimension of China's New Silk Road. Chinese companies are also engaged in the construction of telecommunications infrastructure and grid architecture. While Chinese information technology companies have been quite successful in taking over large segments of Africa's telecommunications sector by providing hardware as well as software solutions, the US as well as various European countries are rather reluctant to grant *carte blanche* to these companies. While the setting-up and modernization of a country's (or a whole region's) telecommunications infrastructure implies job opportunities and contracts for the companies involved, these networks are conceived of as being closely linked to issues of strategic security. The growing digitalization of economic as well as social activities increases the vulnerability by potential cyberattacks or acts of cyberterrorism. Furthermore, cyber espionage is seen as a major threat not only with regard to a country's military defense infrastructure but also its technological innovation capacities. This raises the question of whether the investment in and building of telecommunications networks and IT infrastructure in countries and regions along the Silk Road imply that Chinese companies are also silently exporting "Chinese" e-governance patterns.<sup>7</sup>

While the US has resorted to a partial blocking of its market to (select) Chinese products and Chinese investment in sectors regarded as being linked to core issues of national security, the EU first responded hereto by updating its European Neighborhood Policy and by issuing revised policies for Central Asia and the Balkan states to bring them closer to the *acquis communautaire*. The Chinese initiative to build a

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<sup>7</sup> For a mapping and evaluation of Chinese IT companies, see: Cave et al. (2019).