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CHINA'S GLOBAL GOALS AND ROLES: CHANGING THE WORLD FROM SECOND PLACE?

Many analyses of China's international interactions seem to be driven by a very basic and fundamental question; at what point will China surpass the USA and become the number one global power? Underpinning this question is a lack of trust in China's leaders to exercise global power effectively, and a fear that when they can, they will change the very basis of the global order to suit their needs. And while these questions have been asked for a number of years now, it's fair to say that they have been asked more frequently since the global financial crisis undermined confidence in the existing system, and increased confidence that China's representatives have displayed in establishing what they want for the country from the international system. Moreover, after a period when China has widely been perceived as wanting to have power without leadership or responsibility, there are signs that things are beginning to change and that China's leaders are more willing to go on the front foot to achieve their objectives.

This paper starts from a very basic understanding that China's global power really has increased. This is partly because of what has happened in China, and partly because of what has happened in other parts of the world. But to understand how China's leaders might utilise this increased power and what this might mean for the nature of the global order, it is important to focus on three major determinants of potential Chinese power projection.

First, before trying to understand – or evaluate – China's place in the world, we first need to try and establish the nature of the global order itself. Here, the argument is that conceptions of what the world is becoming if the US unipolar moment is ending are problematic. On one level, the extent to which American power has diminished often seems to be exaggerated. Second, the frequent use of conceptions of multipolarity can result in a misleading understanding of the nature of attraction, alliances and international partnerships in a changing world. This might indeed be a world of increasing and multiple sites of political authority, but it is not, I suggest, a *multipolar* one.

Second, it is important to try and identify how those that matter in China understand the possibilities that exist for pushing for change.¹ That China is now a Great Power seems to be firmly accepted. There is also an emerging consensus of sorts that China occupies a special elevated place amongst the rising powers. But this is tempered by the belief that there is still a considerable power asymmetry between China and the USA. This means that if China (or others) want to change the world, they will have to do so in a world order where the US remains the predominant global power.

Which brings us to the third main focus of this paper. If you are the global Number One, it's *relatively* easy to change the world – what happened during and after the Bretton Woods Conference in July 1944 might be a good example here. But how do you do it as Number Two? Particularly when the Number One doesn't always want to facilitate your interests and others have concerns over

your ambitions. Thus, it is important to identify the major tactics that the Chinese leadership has deployed to try and gain its objectives, and the ways in which increasing global power can be utilised to push for (moderate) change to the global order. And in order to do this, it is essential to also identify and unpack different sources and dimensions of Chinese (global) power, and assess how they are utilised to influence different constituencies in different policy areas.

The nature of the global order: From Unipolarity to What?

If the Cold War was a period of bipolarity, and this was replaced by a transition to a US dominated unipolar system with the collapse of the Soviet Union, what comes next when unipolarity begins to wane? The answer might be back to bipolarity, as the promotion of the G2 idea after the global crisis appears to imply. And as we shall see later, the idea that China and the US do indeed occupy a special place of global responsibility does have some purchase. But in general, the consensus seems to be that we are moving to a period with a range of different power centres in a multipolar world. This multipolar era is one, so the argument goes, where different poles of authority will coexist, and where individual poles are unable to dominate on their own. A world where the existing power(s) can no longer take for granted that others will fall under their influence rather than being attracted to new rising alternatives instead. And a world where the foundations of existing alliances are at the very least increasingly questioned, and perhaps stretched or even fractured.

Given the rise of not just China, but others that are not always wholly satisfied with the nature of the liberal global order, the transition to multipolarity seems to make sense. Particularly when you add in potential fissures *within* the liberal west – for example, over major questions of security and intervention and environmental objectives. It's certainly hard to deny that the world really is changing and that geometries of power are shifting, and there is certainly no attempt here to argue anything different. There is no problem with thinking in terms of multi – as in multiple sites of authority; it's the idea of polarity that is problematic and gives an unrealistic impression of the way that the global order is evolving.

The concept of polarity in international relations is, of course, very much related to the understanding of competing camps and/or blocs during the Cold War era. Here, borrowing from the hard sciences, polarity was seen as being a case of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Put (too) simply, if a country was attracted to one or other of the poles, it became very firmly attached to it on all issues – and by definition adhering to one pole meant that it was repelled by the alternative. Of course the real international politics of bipolarity was never as neat as this. The Non Aligned Movement was designed to resist being drawn towards either camp (though its members were not always wholly successful in doing so), Yugoslavia and Albania both distanced themselves from the Soviet pole, France left NATO in 1966. And while countries that abandoned their original pole rarely fully attached themselves to the other pole instead, the way that China's leaders built a relationship with Washington in the 1970s was an example of how states could benefit from becoming willing pawns in

superpower bipolar rivalry. But in general, the cod scientific understanding was a good enough shorthand reference for a dichotomised world where you had to choose between one or the other (or neither, but not both).

So a very simple conception of a polar world (either bipolar or multipolar) also implies a world of camps and blocs, where choices are made to ally with one pole or another and to stick with/to that pole. This does not seem to be the world that we are likely to live in in the future. Rather, as new powers rise to challenge the existing order, we are more likely to see a world of more fluid, issue based alliances with the specifics of global alliances and configurations of power varying across issue areas. To be sure, some groupings will be overlapping and have common core members. And some alliances are going to be more likely than others; and more likely to be comprehensive and polar-type in nature than others. For example, Washington and Tokyo's common absence from the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is testament to a much more enduring relationship than the more transient coincidence of interests that results in a shared US and Chinese position over piracy. But the fact that the European states broke ranks over the AIIB also shows that you can't always take old alliances for granted.

As another example, China and India share a common dissatisfaction with the current global order, and articulate this through the BRICS initiative. But despite generally warmer relations and moves to solve territorial disputes, significant points of difference remain on security and geostrategic uses with the two competing for influence in Sri Lanka, and typically taking diametrically oppositional positions over Pakistan. And the fact that many European countries thought that it was a good idea to join with China as a partner in the AIIB doesn't mean that they share China's views on Human Rights and the basic conception (and implementation) of the Right to Protect, or that they will share a common platform on all environmental issues. Conversely, despite considerable divergence on military security issues between the USA and China (to say the least), there is still some room for cooperation when security interests coincide; for example, when it comes to anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia.

There is much excitement in China over the promotion of the "One belt one road" (yidai yilu) initiative – the collective term for the land based Silk Road Economic Belt and the oceanic Maritime Silk Road that, if it comes to fruition as currently conceived, will see China lead in linking itself to Central Asia, the Middle East, East Africa and Europe. But there is also an acknowledgement in China (in some quarters at least) that the initial step of economic interaction with some of China's neighbours is somewhat complicated by distrust and insecurity based on competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. It's possible that the latter might derail the former. But it's also not impossible that a dualistic relationship might emerge. Indeed, in many ways it already has. For much of Southeast Asia, the reality of China as an economic partner coexists with the reality of China as a security threat. Or in the language of polarity, while economics attracts, security repels.

Chinese Conceptions of World Order

Although many Chinese writings on the global order often specifically refer to a transition to multipolarity (duojihua), on closer investigation the world they are describing looks more like the fluid fragmented order outlined above than a polarised one. This generates a “strategic opportunity” for China to get some of what it wants in terms of reform of the global order – a strategic opportunity period that was originally identified as being the first decade of the new century, but (not least because of the consequences of the global financial crisis), an opportunity that still exists today.

To try and generalise how China’s place in the global order is being debated and discussed in China is almost a self-defeating process. There are many different voices and opinions in this debate, and to try and extrapolate dominant or overarching positions runs the risk of demeaning and oversimplifying the discourse. But with this in mind, and with apologies to those that are overlooked, it is possible to identify six main positions that represent a consensus of sorts (or at least frequently repeated positions) on where China is at the moment amongst serious thinkers and analysts.²

The first is that a real and significant power transition has taken place, with the global financial crisis marking a key moment in this power shift. Secondly, and largely as a result, the time has been right for China to abandon its previous “low profile” approach to participation in global politics and become more proactive in enunciating and promoting Chinese interests and objectives, and trying to find ways of attaining them. Third, whilst perhaps not shared by all, there is a strong strand of thought that suggests that the speed of the power transition took China by surprise, and that Chinese strategists are still struggling what to do with their new found power. This entails thinking more clearly about what the different sources of Chinese power actually are, and finding ways of utilising them that bring about the sort of change in others that best suit Chinese interests and objectives. Or put another way, it is taking time to work out how to most effectively act as a real Global Power.

Fourth, there is a clear dissatisfaction with the distribution of power within the major institutions of global governance, and some of the norms and principles that underpin them. Revisionist/reformist demands are very real, though the force of their articulation waxes and wanes depending on how other powers seem to be responding to China. Moreover, it is not just about voice and power. There is also strong feeling that China does not get the respect that it deserves – and indeed, the respect that many Chinese want – from the international community. However there is also a wide recognition that China has actually been a major beneficiary of the post Cold War global order. It is important, then, that if China does push for reform, it does so in ways that doesn't destabilise (or even break) the very system that has served Chinese interests quite well over recent decades.

Fifth, although some were quick to point to the beginning of the end of US power during the financial crisis, as the dust has settled a more realistic assessment of American power has come to the fore. If the US really is in decline, it is declining

from a very high level of power and will remain the predominant global power for quite some time to come. And add these third, fourth and fifth “consensuses” together and you get the articulation by Chinese leaders that China has “neither the ability nor the intent” to overturn the current law based system (with an acknowledgement here that overturn is not the same as reform). But this commitment to the current order is in some ways moderate by a fear that others are not. The US is not just sitting passively and letting the world change around it, but is proactively trying to build new structures of global power to entrench this position of predominance. The promotion of the Trans Pacific Partnership, for example, shows that the US is actively trying to create a new Washington-based global governance structure antithetical to Chinese interests; just at the moment that China (and other rising powers) are demanding a greater institutional voice (zhiduxing huayuquan) to reflect the above noted transitions in the global distribution of power. So if the US is trying to build structures to embed its power and influence, so too must China.

The sixth and position is perhaps the most contentious – and is based more on an interpretation of the debates rather than a clearly articulated position. China’s leaders’ calls for the democratisation of international relations is a demand made on behalf of all countries that feel that their voice is not adequately and fairly represented in the international order. And it is not just China that has benefitted from power shifts in the global order - China is just one of a group of rising powers that should have a greater say commensurate to their new status. The stated goal is not to replace one form of domination with another, but instead to create a system of equality where nobody dominates and the international community settles problems collectively respecting both the sovereignty and difference of individual members in keeping with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

But dig a little deeper into what is being said, and how China’s interests might best be attained, and another picture seems to emerge. China might be one of a group of rising powers, but the dominant position implies that it is at the very least first amongst equals. And the suggestion here is that there is a widespread (though often unstated) belief that China is not just a Great Power, but now the global Number Two that has attained a special status in international politics that marks it out from other Great Powers. Asymmetric power relations with the US remain, and as we have noted, will remain for some time, but China has reached a position where, along with the US, it has a special position and responsibility in the global order. Notably, though, this is responsibility and expectations for Great Power behaviour that should always be qualified by the fact that it is still a developing economy that faces many domestic development challenges; it shouldn’t be expected to take on burdens that are more appropriate for already developed established powers. This position is perhaps best epitomised by the promotion of the concept of a “New Type of Great Power Relations” by (amongst others) Xi Jinping. Its promotion by the very top leadership is a signal of an acceptance that China has a special role and duty to work with other Great Powers/the US to solve global problems. Whilst in theory the need to build new relationships could apply to a number of Great Powers, in reality the overwhelming majority of Chinese analyses refer to relations with the

US – what we have termed “A G2 With Chinese Characteristics”.³ This new type of relationship represents China’s preferred future *modus operandi* for how the global No.1 and No.2 should approach key global challenges. It can in part be seen as an attempt to assuage US concerns about Chinese ambitions. It also is an attempt to establish the limits (and perhaps reduce expectations) of what China can and should do as a Great Power that is still in No.2 position; it is Great, but not as Great as the US.

Changing the World from Second Place

So if China’s leaders want to change the world to reflect Chinese interests – to reform it not to overthrow it – they are going to have to do so from *within* the existing power structure that they are trying to revise. And from within an existing power structure where the West in general and the United States in particular remain very powerful actors (despite the premature obituaries that have appeared occasionally over recent years). Even if China is now second only to the US in terms of global power (and whether it is on all issue areas remains a very big *if* indeed (changing the world as No.2 is not the same as changing it as No.1 – particularly when the No.1 often seems less than keen to accommodate all of the No.2’s demands and seems to be actively trying to build structures to keep the No.2 in its place. So how exactly, then, is China going about trying to change the world from second place?

Building on the idea that China might be a dissatisfied Great Power, but one that wants to push for responsible and not destabilising reform, one way is to maintain the ongoing push for reform of the existing institutions of global governance. And in particular to do so with other like-minded dissatisfied powers. The fact that the US congress has failed to ratify changes to the distribution of voting power in the IMF that were agreed in 2010 has left many (and not just in China) frustrated about the prospects for change. Nevertheless, the IMF itself remains committed to reform, and as China is host of the G20 in 2016, it is likely to use its convening and agenda setting power to bring keep governance reform high on the international agenda.

But if reform of existing structures are not possible, or slow in emerging, then China is prepared to introduce new structures of governance to co-exist alongside existing ones. The creation of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are both examples of groupings that aim to provide at least some governance functions in arenas where China can exert considerable influence. More recently, the creation of the AIIB has also shown China’s leaders’ commitment to proactively becoming a provider of new governance structures. And this time one that has got significant buy-in from many of the established Western global actors – with one or two obvious and important exceptions. Here we see China competing for some form of leadership by replicating existing ways of doing things, rather than trying to fundamentally challenge the very nature or essence of global governance and the global order; though potentially with different criteria for extending loans that could have important for how development and aid might be delivered that could undermine the “good

governance” prescriptions associated with neoliberal preferences. While it is still unclear how the One Belt One Road initiatives and the Silk Road Fund will operate and develop, these too might evolve to become an important pillar of a Chinese alternative built on a different conception of how best to “do” governance.

In other areas, though, putative Chinese alternatives do not seem quite so radical. One of the Chinese responses to the TPP initiative is to refocus on the importance of building both bilateral Free Trade Agreements and promoting region-wide inclusive free trade projects like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific. Here we see China as the self proclaimed upholder of the multilateral trading order to maintain its interests and influence in the face of a perceived US challenge to it.

The development of the BRICS and the SCO are also examples of a concerted strategy of pursuing a differential strategy to build different relationships with different partners based on different issues of common concern. In this example, a partnership based on energy and (non traditional) security concerns with the SCO (albeit with economic spillovers) and another based on a shared dissatisfaction with reform of global governance with the rest of the BRICs. To this we can add a more paternalistic (shared) development partnership with African states as epitomised by the Forum on China Africa Cooperation, and a partnership built on shared trade and financial relations (and futures) with ASEAN as an institution, and Asian neighbourhood states in general. And perhaps even here we can contrast the importance that is placed on China’s “strategic partnership” with Europe with the more intense interest in promoting a “new type of great power relations” with the US that reflects Chinese perceptions of Europe’s and America’s contrasting positions in the global order. The aim, then, is to build a network of different sets of relationships with China at the centre; a form of networked power relationships with a “hub and spoke” approach to building relationships and potential alliances.

This approach has much in common with an understanding of a non-polar world and the need to construct different sets of functional issue relationships. It also entails identifying and utilizing different dimensions of power capabilities. While China’s global power is often asserted, it is more seldom defined and categorized. For most part, the focus seems to be on very blunt correlations between size and power; for example the fact that Chinese GDP is closing in on the US figure, or has already surpassed it according to some calculations. And that China continued to grow as many European economies went into recession appears to be a proxy for explaining some sort of power transition between the two. Of course, size and scale really is important and really does have significance for the nature of the global order. But to really understand the way that China influences others, and does so in different ways, we need to be a bit more nuanced in our search for sources of this global power.

On a very basic level, we can distinguish between ideational sources of power on one-hand and material sources on the other. In terms of ideational power, we might identify two key strategic uses of what is often lumped together under the

broad umbrella of soft power. The first is an attempt to establish a preferred national image that might be accepted by others; establishing what type of Great Power China has become and will be in the future. The second is a move to enhance China's discursive power and to increasingly try to establish Chinese definitions and understandings as the basic starting point for international discussions (and ultimately maybe global governance); an attempt to establish Chinese norms not just for China to live by, but perhaps for others too. Here we might tentatively point to a more proactive attempt to promote Chinese definitions of what constitutes universal human rights, of the nature and scope of cybersecurity, and perhaps how we should conceive of and evaluate development.

In terms of material sources of power, we might think in terms of China's ability to influence the way that global production is organised (productive power), and the implications for the supply, price and distribution of major goods and resources. Or the way that China controls access to its market to lever others to do what it wants, or to punish those who infringe on China's "core interests" (market power). While market power in particular has played an important role in defending China from potential criticism – for example, over China's own human rights regime and record – it is through the exercise of financial power that China seems to be most able to proactively move to influence global affairs. It is this financial power that underpins the establishment of new institutions of economic governance, and has been crucial in pushing forward relations with the developing world. And given the way that countries like the UK now are courting China in an attempt not just to gain market access (as was previously the case) but also to encourage Chinese investment, financial power seems to be increasingly key to China's relations with a number of developed economies as well.

Conclusions: Power, Leadership and Legitimacy

Having power is one thing. Turning it into leadership – either at the global or regional level – is another matter entirely. On one level, the extent to which China actually wants to assume leadership roles remains open to question. One of the consensuses in the Chinese debate that was not discussed above is that the major challenges that China faces are domestic. This means that China should not take on international responsibilities that either distract it from dealing with these domestic issues, or place unfair burdens and expectations on it that might harm Chinese development (or both).

That said, the promotion of a new type of great power relations does suggest that China's leaders are prepared to do more than before in becoming a global leader in the supply of global public goods in some areas. As we have seen, this is most obviously the case in the provision of overseas investment (and aid). In addition to providing hard and real benefits for other countries in the form of roads, railways, ports and so on, such leadership might also contribute to a new understanding of what development actually entails that development that is stripped of its current normative political component that sits alongside a preferred understanding of how GDP growth might be attained. Given the

renewed focus on environmental in light of China's "airpocalypse" and other problems, achieving this domestic agenda might also provide opportunities for greater leadership on green issues in the future as well.

But leadership isn't all about what the putative leader wants to do and its capacity to achieve its goals. It is also about "followership"; the acceptance by others of Chinese leadership. We should not forget that other countries have interests and objectives too and that China's role in the global order, whilst clearly dependent on Chinese objectives and actions, is also dependent on how others interpret these objectives and how they act on these interpretations. It is important, then, not to become too sino-obsessed (even when thinking about China), and to retain a keen interest in what others want and expect (and sometimes fear) from their interactions with China. As just one example, how the One Belt One Road initiative eventually pans out will not just be a result of what Chinese actors want and expect from it.

Which brings us to the glaring omission in this paper – China's military power and its role in global security governance. While China has become a significant actor in UN peacekeeping actions, its role as a *peacemaker* remains somewhat limited. China's official respect for sovereignty and non-intervention mean that it is largely confined to rhetorical exhortations for peaceful solutions to transnational issues, rather than actively getting involved in conflict resolution. This position is seen as moral and just within Beijing, but is one reason why others look at China and perceive that it is not stepping up to a global leadership role, and question whether it can really be considered to be the global No.2.

More important, territorial disputes in the South China Sea have resulted in security tensions between China and a number of its neighbours; the very same neighbours that it is trying to build strong economic ties with and perhaps even develop economic leadership over. As noted above, it is entirely possible that we will continue to see a dualistic response to China as both economic opportunity and simultaneously security threat for some time to come. But as also noted above, its also possible that the way that the security agenda is dealt with might impinge on other issue areas as well, and in the process repolarise the way that China is perceived as at least a regional power, and maybe also a global one.

¹ And where this paper refers to China, it is shorthand for those that matter in China, rather than assuming that everybody in the country has the same interests and objectives.

² This section is informed by discussions with leading Chinese international relations experts in Beijing, and I am particularly indebted to discussions with Jia Qingguo, Ren Xiao, and Zhao Minghao.

³ Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, "China's "New Type of Great Power Relations": A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?" forthcoming in *International Affairs*, 2016.