

Be Strong *and* Be Good?

Continuity and Change in China's International Strategy under Xi Jinping

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Abstract: With China entering a new stage of its peaceful rise, how the latest changes in its international strategy may be evaluated becomes an increasingly important question. Existing discussion on the question is problematic and misleading, either paying overwhelming attention to the technical issues such as the logical consistency of the means and the ends of China's foreign policy or emphasizing the unique Sino-centric logic of action adopted by China in its engagement with the world. However interesting these studies may appear, they fail to integrate the two most important factors regarding China's international strategy: the strategic target(s) and the practices. This article attempts to address concerns about China's changing international strategy by investigating these two factors. It firstly traces the evolution of China's strategic target since 1949, suggesting that it is changing from a single-faceted one as being materially strong to a multi-faceted one with increasing efforts to be socially good. This change represents China's changing identity from an outsider of the Western-dominated international society to an active participant in an

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international society witnessing the decline of the West and the rise of the Rest. Subsequently, the article briefly examines China's interaction with other international agents in the second decade of the 21st century, ranging from the United States being the hegemon to Japan being a regional competitor, and to smaller neighboring Southeast Asian countries. It concludes that China's international strategy is at the cross roads of being materially strong or being socially good, or both — each scenario has indicators in China's international practices under Xi Jinping's administration. With ever closer engagement and mutual construction between China and the international society, each side should provide sufficient dynamics for the other to improve its degree of legitimacy in the future.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy, strategic target, national identity, mutual construction.

China's Evolving International Strategy: Why the Debate?

China's rise has attracted increasing attention of scholars from both Western and Chinese International Relations (IR) communities in the past decade, however little consensus has been achieved after years of vigorous debate. Western discussions are initiated by scholars equipped with different Western IR theoretical approaches, and the conclusions are therefore highly controversial. Offensive realists view China as a revisionist power which is trying to or will inevitably seek to reconstruct the existing international order by challenging the American hegemony,¹ whereas their liberal institutionalism-oriented counterparts strongly hold that China is and will continue to be a status quo power content with the economic interests achieved through international cooperation within the existing institutional setting.² In between are scholars with a comparatively open attitude toward

¹John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2010, pp. 381–396. See also John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 402.

²John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1, 2008, pp. 23–37. See also Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2010, pp. 505–532.

China's rise. They are: (a) scholars who, under the influence of constructivism, highlight the social interaction between China and the multilateral international institutions — a process in which China's international identity, intention, and expectation are socially constructed and evolved³; (b) the English School scholars who evaluate the degree of compatibility between China's self-defined identity and the prevailing norms of international society⁴; and (c) scholars who, under the influence of classical realism, maintain there is possibility and flexibility for China to choose to be either a responsible great power or a challenger to the existing hegemon, due to the contingent feature of power politics.⁵

Likewise, Chinese discussions are equally controversial. For example, Professor Qin Yaqing, an advocate of social constructivism, argues that the Chinese philosophical tradition, which is based on the "both-and" logic instead of the Western "either-or" logic, enables China to stick to a peaceful social process when integrating into international society.⁶ By contrast, Professor Yan Xuetong, equipped with structural realism, believes in the inevitable competition between China and the United States for world leadership and suggests that these two countries follow ancient Chinese philosophers' instruction to "display more human authority" in order to win this zero-sum game.⁷

Discussion on China's rise has intensified since the second decade of the 21st century, mainly for three reasons. First, the decline of the United States and the rise of China has become more apparent since the 2008 global financial crisis. This power transition process, which was firstly initiated in the global economy, further undermines the American-led international

³Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2010, pp. 5–36.

⁵Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2012, pp. 53–75.

⁶Qin Yaqing, "International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2010, pp. 129–153.

⁷Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2011.

order and generates increasing curiosity about China's role in the new international order.⁸ Second, Mr. Xi Jinping took leadership at the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, his strategic decisions will largely shape the future of China and world politics in the next decade,⁹ though his approach to international relations remains uncertain. And third, China has proposed a number of new concepts to manage its relationship with the world after the new Chinese leadership assumed power. Short of unequivocal definition, these new concepts increase uncertainty about China's international strategy, though Chinese policymakers' original aim to create these concepts was to crystallize the existing ambiguity about China's logic of action.

Two questions regarding China's international strategy under Xi's leadership are noteworthy. The first is about China's strategic objective. It asks whether China has changed from the *taoguangyanghui* strategy [keeping a low profile — KLP hereafter] aiming at domestic economic and social development to the *fenfayouwei* strategy [striving for achievements — SFA hereafter] searching for international political superiority or even hegemony. The second one is about China's international practice. It asks whether China has become more assertive when dealing with other international actors ranging from the hegemonic power (the United States) to regional powers (especially Japan), and to smaller neighboring states (the Philippines and Vietnam for example), as well as from international organizations such as the UN to regional international organizations such as ASEAN. These two questions together further the vigorous debate on China's rise by respectively investigating the strategic ends and the practical means of China's foreign policy under Xi's leadership.

Most studies of China's international strategy are problematic due to stereotyped thinking and deficient analytical framework.

⁸American scholars strongly suggest the end of the American-led liberal world order and thus advocate the coming of global governance. According to Amitav Acharya, it is not about the decline of the U.S. but the decline of American order. See Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 1.

⁹He Kai and Feng Huiyun, "Xi Jinping's Operational Code Beliefs and China's Foreign Policy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2013, p. 210.

Existing answers to the above two questions are problematic. First, these answers are as controversial as the previous conclusions on China's rise. Regarding the question on China's international strategy, while some scholars claim the transformation of China's strategy from the domestic economic development-oriented KLP to the international political ambition-oriented SFA for better competition with the United States over international leadership,¹⁰ others believe that China's international strategy under Xi's leadership, more specifically the SFA, is a continuous evolution instead of a complete departure from the KLP, a process in which the dichotomous competition between China and the United States is not necessarily the case though noticeable changes do occur.¹¹ Regarding the question on China's international practice, many scholars highlight the contradiction between China's strategic ends and means;¹² and some emphasize the internal conflict between China's self-defined identity and its national interest,¹³ while a few others believe that China's seemingly contradictory strategic design is a reasonable outcome of the specific Chinese dialectic, the *zhongyong*, which assumes the inclusiveness of two opposite extremes as indispensable parts of an organic whole.¹⁴

Second, these answers are made via problematic analytical frameworks and therefore untenable. Analysts speculate on China's international strategy, partially from officially released Chinese materials and partially from either the existing Western IR theories or ancient Chinese philosophical/political ideas, given that such strategy is yet to be fully elaborated. Unfortunately, Western theories or Chinese ideas alone are insufficient to this end, though they provide useful background

¹⁰Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2014, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 160. See also Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2011.

¹¹Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, pp. 285–314.

¹²Barry Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2014, p. 389.

¹³Shih Chih-Yu and Yin Jiwu, "Between Core National Interest and a Harmonious World: Reconciling Self-role Conceptions in Chinese Foreign Policy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2013, pp. 59–84.

¹⁴Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, p. 293.

knowledge which in turn shape the ways of thinking over China's strategy.¹⁵ On the one hand, Western IR theories have to guard against the inclination to make Western experience the benchmark to understand the predominantly non-Western world's political systems, an incommensurability problem Hedley Bull wisely raised in the early 1970s but which is yet to be solved.¹⁶ On the other hand, bringing Chinese ideas into discussion on China's logic of international action takes the risk of transmuting ancient ideas to contemporary discourse.¹⁷ The risk is exceptionally high, given that the ancient Chinese political ideas and traditional Chinese moral concerns are neither familiar to ordinary modern Chinese as background knowledge nor constantly active in China's domestic and international actions as a guiding principle. In addition, a simple attempt to combine Western theory and Chinese thought is also challenging because scholars have to deal with the problem of "translatability of moral and political visions across civilizational and cultural barriers and divides," which is difficult to overcome if not completely insurmountable.¹⁸

Third, these answers are misleading because they divert scholars' attention from an important research object, namely the strategic design process, to a superficial one as the consistency of the means and ends of China's strategy. For example, Barry Buzan points out the "durable contradiction" between China's Peaceful Rise/Development strategy (PRD) and its approach toward solving the Taiwan issue.¹⁹ This finding has very

¹⁵For the constructive role of background knowledge in knowledge making process in International Relations discipline, please see Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International Practices," *International Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2011, pp. 1–36.

¹⁶Hedley Bull, "The Theory of International Politics, 1919–1969," in B. Porter, ed., *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics: 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

¹⁷Alasdair Macintyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past," in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 34.

¹⁸Zhang Yongjing, "The Idea of Order in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: A Wigh-tian Exploration," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1, 2014, p. 171.

¹⁹Barry Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2014, p. 297.

limited value to our understanding of China's international strategy because it neither tells us how such contradiction is established and evolved in the Chinese social, cultural, and political context nor illustrates the possible influence of such contradiction on China's rise.

An international strategy is an idealized situation which depends on factors including the strategic purpose it intends to achieve, the issue areas it tries to address, and the agents it deals with. For example, to address the same strategic concern of regional stability, China deals with the U.S and Japan in different ways. And for the strategic goal of upholding territorial integrity, China reserves the right to solving the Taiwan issue by force but meanwhile sticks to a peaceful approach in maritime disputes with Southeast Asian countries. In addition, the consistency of an international strategy is also a function of the interaction between domestic interest groups including the increasing "bureaucratic players" and "new actors on the margins."²⁰ Under the influence of the above factors, the strategic design adopted by a great power in international practice is usually imperfect or even inconsistent though still effective and influential. A good example is exceptionalism that is widely observed in major powers' international strategy.²¹ Therefore, to expect a consistent strategy distracts attention from the real important question — the dynamic strategy-designing process.

This article addresses concerns about China's international strategy under Xi Jinping's leadership by answering the above two important questions. It firstly focuses on China's strategic target in the second decade of the 21st century and then evaluates how it is compatible with China's international practice. The research is based on the assumption of a close correlation between strategic objective and international practice — the change of one is usually viewed as the background for the occurrence of the change of the other. Of course this is not to deny the concrete influence of other factors on China's strategy. For example, the international strategy of major

²⁰Susan Lawrence, "Perspectives on Chinese Foreign Policy — Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on 'China's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Players,'" April 13, 2011, p. 2.

²¹For Sino-exceptionalism, see Zhang Feng, "The rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2013, pp. 305–328. And for a general discussion of exceptionalism in major powers' international strategy, see K. J. Holsti, "Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is It Exceptional?" *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, pp. 381–404.

international players such as the United States' "Rebalancing Strategy" has tremendous influence on China's strategic design and such domestic concerns as the legitimacy of the ruling party playing an important role in China's foreign policymaking.²² The article simply assumes that, despite the "fracturing of authority" of China's foreign policymaking process which has been accurately observed by Western analysts,²³ supreme Chinese policymakers are still well capable of taking into consideration the international and domestic factors and of adjusting China's international strategic objective accordingly, though misunderstanding and misjudgment might occur. Meanwhile, the article does not aim to establish a strict causal relationship between the means and the ends in the process of China's strategic design because different approaches can be chosen for the same strategic concern. Instead, it suggests a strong correlation between China's strategic objectives and its international strategy, which mutually construct each other.

China's Strategic Target: From Being Strong to Being Good

Analysts of China's foreign policy have offered various answers regarding China's strategic objective under Xi's leadership. However, most of these answers are misleading because they are based on an implicit assumption that a country can only have one ultimate strategic goal at a given time. Keeping this assumption in mind, IR scholars, Western and Chinese alike, try to define the ultimate goal of China's recent international strategy. For example, China's latest effort to strengthen its economic ties with other countries is viewed as a result of political rather than economic concerns.²⁴ Qin Yaqing attributes this oversimplified assumption to the Western either-or logic which is deeply rooted in modern Western philosophy and may not be suitable to understanding the logic of action of non-Western countries

²²Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, pp. 303–304.

²³Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, "New Foreign Policy Actors in China," *SIPRI Policy Paper*, September 26, 2010.

²⁴Yan Xuetong claims that "even the target of strengthening economic interdependence is out of political concerns rather than economic interests." See Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2014, p. 162.

which have their distinct philosophical traditions.²⁵ He thus brings us back to the question raised by Hedley Bull more than forty years ago about the applicability of Western knowledge to understanding the non-Western world.

The real situation is much more complicated — a country can and often does have different purposes at a given time. And because these purposes are not always consistent, a country's international practices are often inconsistent or even self-contradictory — that is why exceptionalism is observed in great powers' international strategy.²⁶ Therefore, the primary

Major-power
exceptionalism is
universal because
of their conflicting
strategic goals at any
given time.

task is not to distinguish the ultimate purpose but to make clear which one is the most important at a given time, and why. Of course, China may have many possible goals such as the domestic concerns of economic development, social stability, and the ruling party's political legitimacy, as well as the international concerns including safeguarding China's sovereignty and maintaining a friendly international environment and Chi-

na's great power status, etc. For the sake of convenience, this article categorizes the many possible strategic concerns of a country into two groups, that is, those for being materially strong and those for being socially good. This dichotomous categorization adopts the international strategy of the United States as the empirical evidence: being a hegemon, the United States struggles for both moral leadership and material superiority.

This article adopts the dichotomous categorization of a country's strategic goals and briefly investigates the changing strategic concern of China's

²⁵Qin Yaqing highlights the difference between the Western philosophical tradition and the Chinese philosophical tradition as Western conflictual dialectic vs. Chinese both-and logic in his 2010 article. See Qin Yaqing, "International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2010, pp. 132–141. He further elaborates on the Western Hegelian dialectic vs. Chinese *zhongyong* dialectic in his 2014 article. See Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, pp. 290–295.

²⁶K. J. Holsti, "Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is It Exceptional?" *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, pp. 381–404.

international strategy. This review starts from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. China in Mao's era was an outsider of the Western-dominated international community which was the target of its world revolutionary practices. Although it once belonged to the Soviet Union-led socialist camp, it was unwilling to acknowledge the moral superiority of the USSR. Being a state outside of both the Western and the Soviet camps, China had extremely limited impetus to be socially acceptable because there was no society for its legitimate existence. China's strategic concern in this specific period had little alternative but to be a strong power which could compete with not only the United States but also the USSR. Being strong thus became its main strategic goal which was repeatedly demonstrated in its domestic economic and political plans such as the Great Leap Forward. As a result, China's sense of international social responsibility was weak: when it faced difficulty simultaneously in resisting the pressure from the two superpowers in the late 1960s, out of concern for national security, it could easily abandon its previous supporters in the Third World in order to reconcile with the U.S. to counterbalance the Soviet Union.

China's strategic concern has changed since the Reform and Opening-up with increasing attention to its responsibility to the international community. Being materially strong and being socially good have become the two primary strategic goals.

The KLP, though differing dramatically from Mao Zedong's revolutionary international strategy, follows the basic logic of action in Mao's era, owing to the accumulation of national material capability. Although the KLP has considerably limited the space of China's activities in the international community for international public goods, yet the sense of social membership in belonging to an imperfect international society has been cultivated — China has gradually learnt to view itself as a member of the existing international society, in which it plays an indispensable role for both its existence and its progress.

As a result, China has changed its approach to the imperfect international society from overthrowing it as an outsider to reforming it from within. China's growing voice to upgrade the existing international political and economic order to a more fair and reasonable one well illustrates

Being materially strong and socially good has been China's strategic goal since the late 1970s.

both its reluctance to accept the existing order completely and the shortage of its determination to overturn the order for all. Though some observers attribute China's changing position toward the international community to the ruling party's urgent needs for a friendly international environment, which is the necessary precondition of domestic social stability based on economic development, the process of interaction between China and the rapidly expanding international society after the end of the Cold War also plays an important role — the expansion of international society with dramatically increasing number of social members further increases the cost of China making the "either in or out" choice adopted during Mao's era.

China's strategic concern of being socially good has become increasingly apparent since the early 21st century. One noticeable example is the self-defined image as a responsible great power which is not only an important member of the international society but also a force for global peace, stability, and growth.²⁷ And the latest evidence is the newly released development program of "One Belt, One Road" raised by President Xi Jinping in 2013, which makes regional economic and political cooperation the primary concern.²⁸ These policies have well demonstrated China's increasing desire to be socially good to international society, certainly a large step forward compared with China's previous tactics of trying to bear as little international responsibility as possible.²⁹

The increasing expectation to be a socially good power, however, does not necessarily mean that China has given up its strategic objective to be a materially strong power. On the contrary, China has accelerated the steps to

²⁷Shaun Breslin, "China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power," *Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring, 2010), p. 53.

²⁸Xi Jinping, "Carry Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to Build a Better World through Win-Win Cooperation: Address at Meeting Marking the 60th Anniversary of the Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," July 1, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1170143.shtml. See also "China to speed up construction of new Silk Road: Xi," *China Daily*, November 06, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/06/content_18880708.htm.

²⁹Chen Zhimin, "International Responsibility, Multilateralism, and China's Foreign Policy," in Mario Telo, ed., *State, Globalization and Multilateralism: The Challenges of Institutionalizing Regionalism* (Springer, 2012), pp. 83–84.

building up its material strength in general and its military capability in particular. China's military spending has maintained a high-speed increase during the past decade. And China explicitly makes being a maritime power a future prospect, exactly when its territorial disputes with South East Asian countries are being intensified.³⁰ It is reasonable to expect that, in international arenas, China will continue with the strategic goal of being materially strong for the remaining years of Xi's leadership, especially as the security situation in the Asia-Pacific is likely to get worse with the growing U.S. engagement in the region.³¹

Therefore, China's international strategy has experienced dramatic changes regarding its strategic objective, though some of them had already been initiated prior to Xi's leadership. Gradually giving up the previous monistic goal of being materially strong, China now has two strategic goals within its international strategic design: one is its lasting ambition to be materially strong, which can be traced back at least to Mao's era; the other indicates its desire to be socially improved, which can be viewed as China's critical reflection on its peaceful rise during the past thirty years or so. It is too early to judge which one will be the predominant concern within China's international strategy in the next decade, because the process of China's integration with the international community is still ongoing. What is for certain is that China's choice is not a function of its own free will; rather, it is a result of the ongoing interaction and mutual influence between China and the international community. In other words, if the mode of interaction between China and the world turns out to be a power-oriented one, observers should not be surprised to see China further strengthening its military capability and more inclined to solve existing

³⁰"Xi Advocates Efforts to Boost Maritime Power," *Xinhua*, July 31, 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-07/31/content_29589836.htm.

³¹According to Zheng Yongnian, Asia has maintained peace during the past thirty years along with China's peaceful rise strategy; however, the stability in Asia is under threat after the U.S. initiated its "Return to Asia" Strategy. In this sense, China's new strategy, if it really exists, should be viewed as a reaction to the regional disorder caused by the U.S. See Zheng Yongnian, "MeiguoChongfanYataiyuYazhouZixu de Jubian" [The Strategy of the United States' "Return to Asia" and the Great Change of Asian Order], *DongnannyaNanyanYanjiu* [Southeast Asian and South Asian Studies], No. 1, 2013, pp. 32–33.

disputes, especially those concerning territorial sovereignty, by means of force.³² However, if such interaction is a social norm-oriented one, then increasing negotiation and concession can be expected.

China's International Practice in the 21st Century

Whether China will grow to be a militant power largely depends on its interaction with the world.

Starting from the preliminary understanding of China's strategic goals, this article continues to evaluate China's international practice in the 21st century in the hope of clarifying whether China has changed its approach to the global hegemon, the United States, to regional powers like Japan, and to smaller neighboring countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines. This further answers the question as to whether China's international strategy has changed under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Has China changed its approach to the United States? Some Chinese scholars say "yes" because they view the SFA as evidence of China's determination to compete with the U.S. for global leadership. However, it is a serious misjudgment because China always tries to prevent direct conflict or competition with the U.S. This is primarily because many Chinese observers and analysts tend to see the considerable gap between China and the U.S. in material strength. A popular view is that the U.S. is not getting weaker but is strengthening, especially in East Asia.³³ Meanwhile, the materially strong United States has overwhelming influence on international issues relevant to China's core national interests such as national security and territorial integrity. Thirdly, the intensifying economic

³²According to Sun Xuefeng's empirical studies on China's use of force since 1949, China will use high levels of force including engaging in wars or lengthy conflicts if it enjoys the favorable relative capability to its rivals. This suggests a pessimistic future where the international mode between China and other countries is material capability-oriented. See Sun Xuefeng and Huang Yuxing, "Revisiting China's Use of Force in Asia: Dynamic, Level and Beyond," *Pacific Focus*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, 2012, pp. 393–420.

³³Andrew Scobell and Scot Harold, "An 'Assertive' China? Insights from Interviews," *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013, p. 120.

interdependence between China and the U.S. puts the two countries in “a mutually assured destructive relationship economically: each can retaliate against economic warfare waged by the other. And the consequence is that neither can easily coerce the other through economic warfare.”³⁴ Therefore, it is unlikely for Chinese leaders to take a confrontational or even rivaling posture toward the United States. In fact, since 2012, Chinese leaders have on various official occasions openly reiterated their respect for the U.S. leadership, both global and regional. This should not be treated as only a rhetoric tactic.

The second case is China’s approach to Japan and the answer is very partially yes. China has undeniably taken a tougher position toward the Japanese government since 2013. This is directly because of the territorial disputes over the Diaoyu Islands and historical issues regarding Japanese war crimes in World War II. However, a further concern is that the two countries’ competing identity as the leading regional power makes mutual trust difficult to establish but very easy to destroy. In this circumstance, economic cooperation has ceased to be viewed as a reliable safety valve against future conflict between the two countries, and China’s approach to Japan has been dramatically changed accordingly. Nevertheless, even during the toughest period of the Sino-Japanese relationship between 2013 and 2014, non-official negotiation between Chinese and Japanese scholars, as well as retired senior officials on crisis management over the disputed islands was ongoing, in order to prevent possible crisis escalation.³⁵

And the third case is China’s approach to Southeast Asian countries, especially those who have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Is China adopting an assertive posture toward the smaller neighboring countries? Probably yes. “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact,” then Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi pointed out to Singapore’s Foreign Minister, George Yeo, at an ASEAN meeting in 2010.³⁶ This line is often quoted by international

³⁴Robert Art, “The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 125, No. 3, 2010, p. 364.

³⁵“Chinese and Japanese experts’ dialogue on East China Sea airspace security held,” *China Military Online*, February 06, 2015, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-02/06/content_6344391.htm.

³⁶John Pomfret, “U.S. takes a Tougher Tone with China,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 2010.

analysts to substantiate China's changing approach from its friendly neighboring policy to a power politics-oriented policy, preventing its Southeast Asian neighbors from allying with the United States by intimidation. However, this may not be the whole story of China's approach to smaller neighbors. For instance, in 2014, China's investment in the Philippines, one of the toughest claimants over the South China Sea, increased

by six times compared with that of 2013.³⁷

China is sticking to good neighbor policy and refraining from coercive actions despite its growing might.

And China's latest development program, "One Belt, One Road," provides tremendous opportunity for Southeast Asian countries, some of which have territorial disputes with China. These all suggest that China, while showing its strength occasionally, is still sticking to its good neighbor policy and refraining from using its material superiority to coerce neighboring countries.

Conclusion

This article provides a "yes-and-no" answer to the question regarding the change of China's international strategy under Xi Jinping's leadership. The "yes" answer suggests that China's international strategy has experienced noticeable changes regarding its strategic objective and its mode of behavior to some degree. And the "no" answer has two meanings. For one, some of these changes can be traced back to Hu Jintao's terms, when Chinese leaders began to discuss China's moral responsibility for the international society. So China's international strategy under Xi can be viewed as a continuity of that under Hu. For another, China's international strategy is still in the process of change and its future direction is uncertain. It can either move toward its social responsibility for the international society in the hope of being a socially good member or become more inclined to exert its material strength as a strong regional or even global power — this

³⁷Krista Angela, "Chinese Investments in PH up six fold despite territorial dispute," *InterAksyon*, October 29, 2014, <http://www.interaksyon.com/business/98188/chinese-investments-in-ph-up-sixfold-despite-territorial-dispute>.

depends on how China and the international community interacts in the future.

China is at the crossroads of strategic choices: it can either be a strong power of material superiority or a good power of international acceptance. The choices represent different definitions of power which are either a country's economic and military capability or its social and moral influence. The different understandings of power reflect different ontological speculations about the modern world — one based on the anarchical international structure defined by the deployment of material capability, or one gradually consolidated through the expansion of international norms. Each understanding of the world corresponds to a specific period of China's modernization: the former represents a world perceived by China from the Opium War to the end of Mao's era in which states struggle for national security because they are situated in a self-help condition, with no guarantee of safety and survival; the latter is a world experienced by China after the end of the Cold War, in which great powers compete for political legitimacy because they are embedded in a social network of relationships with implicit or explicit normative requirements.³⁸ An optimistic view is when the international community continues to expand from the West to the Rest, China will maintain its choice to integrate into the international society. As growing evidence indicates, that is very likely to be the main tone of China's international strategy for the remaining years of Xi Jinping's leadership.

³⁸Legitimacy here refers to the social acceptance of a state's behavior by international society. It is primarily a political concept indicating the normative requirement of international politics. For a theoretical discussion of legitimacy in international relations, see Christian Reus-Smit, "Power, Legitimacy, and Order," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, pp. 341–353.