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Towards a New Sino-centric World Order? How China Views Global Order

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Jinghan Zeng

China's rise is proving to be one of the most important developments of the early 21st century. This has led to considerable academic and public interests to interpret the implications of China's rise for the world. Martin Jacques, for example, argues that we are witnessing a global power transition towards a new Sinocentric world order (Jacques 2009). It will be a new order in Chinese terms, for Chinese interests and written by Chinese. Others point to a more moderate transition, in which there will be a reordering of hierarchies in global power architecture (Goh 2013).

Along with the debate about what the future world order might look like, how China will rise to the power is also a focus of the debate. To offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer, a large scale military clash is very likely (Mearsheimer 2014a, b). It is argued that China will seek to dominate East Asia and inevitably challenge the US' global hegemony, while the US will not tolerate China's global expansion. Their conflicts will be translated into "security competition with great potential to war." A similar argument is made by Graham Allison who uses "Thucydides Trap" to describe the US-China relations (Allison 2015). It is argued that this bilateral relations is likely to repeat the conflicts between Athens and Sparta in ancient Greece. To many liberal, however, this is not our destiny. It is argued that China as the status quo power who significantly benefits from the existing liberal international order will not seek to overthrow the current order. The current global order is liberal enough to accommodate China's peaceful rise (Ikenberry 2011, Reilly 2012).

While these debates help to understand how China's rise is perceived at the global stage, a crucial dimension of China's rise is missing in the debate i.e. how China perceives its rise and the global order. This paper argues that Chinese perceptions of global order is key to understand the implications of China's rise. This working paper would like to raise a few points in regards to Chinese perceptions of the global order.

First of all, there is not the single Chinese view of global order. When it comes to the literature of international relations, China is often taken as a unitary actor, assuming that there is one coherent Chinese view - this is also partly contributed by the perceptions that the Chinese authoritarian regime is considered as highly capable to mobilize domestic actors to achieve its goals. This unit of analyses often lead to misleading understanding of China's foreign policy. As the author's previous works show (Zeng, Stevens, and Chen 2017, Zeng, Xiao, and Breslin 2015, Zeng 2017, Zeng and Breslin 2016, Zeng 2019), within China's policy and strategic community, there are a variety of Chinese views in regards to China's role in the world and how China shall respond to the shifting global order. It is often hard to find any consensus in those debates. After all, China's policy and strategic analysts have very different worldviews and evaluations of the international political landscapes.

In addition, the size of Chinese bureaucracy decides that the Chinese governmental organizations have very diverse policy interests and agenda. Different Chinese ministries, provinces and state-owned enterprise have their own views of Chinese foreign policy due to their department interests. The development of globalization including economic dependence, the rise of transnational corporations and interests, has further diversified those departmental interests and thus made this phenomena more obvious. This is rightly captured by Jones' and Hameiri's literature on state transformation (Hameiri and Jones 2016, Jones and Zou 2017, Jones 2017). This domestic bureaucratic governance problem has led to conflicting Chinese actions at various global matters ranging from South China Sea, nuclear non-proliferation to Chinese compliance with WTO. The central agencies in Beijing are often incapable of coordinating the large bureaucracy when it comes to those matters. In this regard, we shall pay more attention to the work of China studies, which has documented the fragmentation and decentralization of Chinese political system. We also need to look into this domestic dynamics and study "Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) Which Channel (with) What Effect" to exert their voices for the sake of their agenda.

Second, the Chinese views of global order have shifted according to the changing global political landscapes. The 2008 financial crisis is a key milestone during which China suddenly realized its importance in the global order. This event also led to critical Chinese reflections on the strength of Western capitalist system and China's own capacity. At the time, China clearly rejected the idea of "G2" as it was believed that China was not ready to take any substantive global leadership. After all, it was still a developing country, which should focus on domestic development rather than solving global problems. Yet, scroll forward to 2013, a very different understanding of China's role became evidence when the then new Chinese president Xi Jinping put forward the idea of "new type of great power relations". Arguably, it is the Chinese version of "G2" or G2 with Chinese characteristics, in which China shares the similar power status with the US to co-govern the world (Zeng and Breslin 2016).

Along with the shifting understanding of global order and China's role, Chinese scholars are debating the best grand strategy to deal with it (Zhu 2012, Du and Ma 2015, Zhang 2012). This is perhaps one of if not the most important debates about Chinese foreign policy. To many, China is still facing significant domestic problems and far from capable of taking the global leadership. Thus, China should continue Deng Xiaoping's old approach to keep a low profile at the global stage and "never seek for global leadership." Others, however, argue that the "keeping a low profile" strategy left by Deng Xiaoping in 1980s is too dated to reflect today's political landscapes. With China's rise to the second largest world

economy, there is no place for China to hide its power and bid time. If China does not actively secure interests, it will not be able to further develop itself. In this regard, China should actively take global responsibility to become a “responsible global leader”.

Arguably, since 2012, Xi Jinping’s leadership clearly took the approach focusing on global leadership. This is evident by the creation of China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the introduction of a series of Chinese-coined foreign initiatives including Belt and Road Initiative, New Type of Great Power Relations and Internet Sovereignty, the rise of Chinese contribution to the United Nations especially peacekeeping. All of these reflect Chinese ambitions to become a global norm shaper if not norm maker. Despite so, this debate about China’s grand strategy will continue to dominate China’s strategic discussion. Currently, the Chinese strategic community’s reflections about “strategic overstretch” is one example. Many blame that the current international difficulties that China is facing – especially US-China trade war – is caused by China’s immature “seeking for leadership” approach. To them, China is not ready to confront the US and lead the world, and thus China should switch back to its keeping a low profile approach. Future research shall closely observe this debate and trace the shifting Chinese perceptions of global order.

Third, Chinese views of global order do have different emphasizes. For example, due to China’s authoritarian system, the state plays a crucial role to regulate the market, while the role of NGOs is quite limited. This is translated to Chinese vision of global order. When it comes to Chinese views of global economic order, for example, the emphasis is to strengthen the states’ role in global economic governance. This is quite different from the discussion in the Western context, in which “governance without government” is a key theme and global economic governance focuses on the role of NGOs and international organization(Zeng 2019). Similarly, when it comes to Chinese views of global cyber order, it also emphasize on the role of the state and government regulations in cyber space instead of internet giants and NGOs (Zeng, Stevens, and Chen 2017).

It is notable that Chinese vision of global order is not coherent and systematic. China is still far from capable of generating an alternative idea for global order. The recent slogan about “shared future for mankind” is one of Xi Jinping’s attempts. It points to the positive connotations of “win-win” and “mutual trust”, however, it is too hollow and fuzzy to have any practical meaning. In this regard, the idea needs a lot more work to do. It remains to be seen whether China’s academic and policy community can give us any surprise.

To sum up, China’s rise has profound implications for the global order. Yet, without studying how it is perceived within China, we can not develop an accurate understanding of China’s rise and thus a proper response to it. In this regard, future studies shall study the domestic Chinese debates and examines consensuses and disagreements within Chinese strategic and policy community. This will not help us to develop a good understanding but also impact on the way how China may rise.

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Jinghan Zeng is Professor of China and International Studies in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University. He can be reached by J.zeng3@lancaster.ac.uk.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org