China’s world view in the Xi Jinping Era: Where do Japan, Russia and the USA fit?

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Abstract
A ‘world view’ perspective is deployed to show President Xi Jinping’s dominance of China’s policy-making environment and the ideas that he and his leadership group have tried to promote. We use this framework to explain China’s relations with three major countries that are crucial to manage successfully in order for China to consolidate its global and regional ambitions – Japan, Russia and the United States. The article shows how the degree of alignment between China’s and these great powers’ world views influences their levels of resistance or acceptance of the policies that flow from Beijing’s world view. We find that, while the United States and Russia lie at opposing ends of the resistance-acceptance spectrum, Japan represents an important middle ground along it. This finding encourages movement away from the overly simplistic dyadic depictions of global politics associated with ‘new Cold War’ or ‘authoritarian versus liberal’ labelling.

Keywords
China-Japan, China-Russia, China-USA, China’s world view, cognitive and normative approaches, global order, ideational approaches, Xi Jinping

Introduction
The dramatic changes in China’s material and political status since the advent of ‘Reform and Opening’ in late 1978 finally seem to have resulted in the Chinese leadership’s clearer articulation of its intention to reshape global order in ways that better reflect its world view, and its need to reorder its relations with countries of importance to it. As the Party’s General Secretary and President, Xi Jinping, put it during his lengthy 19th Party Congress speech in October 2017, the country’s development had reached a new ‘historical juncture’. The Party had propelled China ‘into a leading position’ in all major areas of policy, and had ensured the country had ‘crossed the threshold into a new era’ (Xi, 2017b: 9).

In this contribution to the Special Issue, we make the following two main moves: first, we place President Xi Jinping’s world view at the centre of our exploration of some of the foreign policy consequences of this perceived change in China’s status. Second, we relate

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that world view to China’s relations with great powers – that is, those states that have the greatest influence over the trajectory of China’s objectives in world politics – choosing Japan, Russia, and the United States because Beijing views them as crucial to consolidating China’s place in this ‘new era’ of international relations (IR). Japan stands as China’s main economic and political competitor at the regional level, and its alliance with the United States also enables Tokyo to compete with Beijing in strategic terms. Yet, Japan has also been important to China as an investment and trading partner, and bilateral cooperation holds out the prospect of thwarting any US desire to isolate or contain China. Putin’s Russia offers China’s Xi a close strategic relationship, together with economic and military ties that help China to consolidate its position as a strong state. Russia also plays a role in constraining US power and in bifurcating US attention to two states that Washington, in its national security documents, has identified as its most significant strategic rivals. The relationship with the United States, the most complex of the three for China, is key to China’s global and regional ambitions. Governments around the world, including China and the United States, typically describe that bilateral relationship as the most significant in world politics. Beijing recognises that Washington remains the most capable of the three states – militarily, economically, and politically – of frustrating China’s return to greatness. Successful management of the relationship is crucial to Beijing, but the deterioration in ties seems to be accelerating.

Our analytical approach allows us to make two key contributions to the literature. First, it is puzzling as to why any single policy initiative, whether it be Chinese investment in developing countries, or island construction activities in the South China Sea, generates resistance from some states in the global system but acceptance from others. In demonstrating how these individual policies derive from Xi’s underlying world view, we show that the degree of US, Russian or Japanese resistance or acceptance lies in the extent to which Xi’s world view aligns with their own. Second, by analysing collectively China’s relations with these three great powers, we move beyond the overly simplistic dyadic depictions of global politics that dominate the IR literature generally, and the study of China in particular. Indeed, since the advent of the Xi Jinping government, considerable attention has been devoted to analysis of the China-US relationship, and to a lesser extent the China-Russia relationship, with that debate often seeking to prove or disprove the emergence of a ‘new Cold War’, or the rise of authoritarian states seeking to overturn the liberal international order. We suggest that this is the wrong starting point. Instead, our approach allows us to conclude that a more complex spectrum exists in China’s relations with the United States, Russia, and Japan. While the United States and Russia exist at either ends of this spectrum, Japan represents an important middle ground along it, and is, most likely, an exemplar of many Asia-Pacific states whose relations with China similarly defy ‘new Cold War’ or ‘authoritarian vs liberal’ labels.

A world view perspective

More than a decade ago, Jeffrey Legro (2007) highlighted the challenge that China posed to IR’s two dominant analytical approaches, realism and liberalism, both of which offered radically different conclusions about a rising China’s future behaviour. Rather than focusing on power- and economic interdependence-based explanations, Legro (2007: 515) instead advocated a focus on ‘intentions’ or those ‘dominant ideas’ within China that shaped ‘enduring patterns of national behaviour’. This article takes up Legro’s call, and the wider social turn that is evident in the study of IR, by exploring China’s relations with
these three great powers through the lens of Xi Jinping’s ideas about the world. Ideas allow us to examine how key decision-makers understand and operate in the world: how they define their goals and interests, how they wrestle with and attempt to solve policy problems, and how they communicate their policies to different audiences (King, 2016: 7–8). Our analytical framework divides ideas into the following two types: background ‘world views’ and foreground ‘policy proposals’. At the background level, world views are underlying normative and cognitive assumptions about how the world should or does work. World views may be derived from ideology or from a country’s past experiences, for instance, and shape behaviour or policy in a deep, constitutive way by constraining the range of policies considered possible or legitimate. At the foreground level, policy proposals are ideas that flow from background world views. These foreground ideas exert a more direct, causal effect on actual policy decisions and behaviour by providing specific solutions to problems or goals defined first at the background level (Campbell, 1998; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; King, 2016). In our analysis of Xi’s world view and policy proposals, we are not attempting to ‘get inside’ Xi Jinping’s mind, or to mine his biography as a way to understand his personal beliefs. Rather, our source for these ideas derives from Xi’s speeches, writings, and other official records.

Legro’s call is even more pressing in the era of Xi Jinping because there is a closer alignment between Xi’s ideas and the construction of China’s policy thinking and behaviour than was the case during his predecessors’ period in office. Earlier, the Chinese government had adopted a collective leadership model that was characterised by creeping decentralisation of foreign policy decision-making (Economy, 2018: 9; Hu, 2019: 3). Xi recognised both a weakening in the Party’s stature as a result of high levels of corruption as well as the widespread adoption of capitalist economic principles, and an unwillingness to recognise that the strategic opportunity for China to rejuvenate – defined in what follows – was closing. Once in power from late 2012, Xi made haste to establish himself as China’s ‘core leader’, with greater control over foreign and domestic policymaking. For example, Xi chairs the Central Military Commission, and has placed himself in charge of a swathe of Leading Groups, including those most important in foreign affairs and national security. By his second term, ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’ had been elevated into China’s written constitution, giving Xi a status in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history not enjoyed by any leader since Mao Zedong. Xi’s hold on power became even further entrenched when he abolished the two-term limit for the state presidency in March 2018 (Economy, 2018: 9–18; Hu, 2019: 13). Finally, Xi has paid considerably more attention to foreign policy than either of his predecessors (Wang, 2019: 15). Whereas, they stuck closely to Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of maintaining a low profile in international affairs, Xi quickly has initiated a host of work conferences and high level meetings to set out his personal vision for Chinese foreign policy; has made dozens of overseas trips; and has ensured that China has been an active participant in multilateral institutions and platforms spanning the region and the globe (Hu, 2019: 10).

In observing Xi’s ideas, we do not suggest that he represents a complete break with China’s past, for elements of his ideas have powerful antecedents. However, Xi is distinctive in two ways. First, Xi’s world view is a confident one. Whereas, past Chinese leaders have placed relatively more emphasis on China’s victimisation at the hands of foreign powers (see, for example, Callahan, 2010), Xi instead places emphasis on China’s ‘great revival’, ‘renewal’, or ‘rejuvenation’, which he sees as a return to China’s glorious past and its leading role in world affairs. Indeed, Xi sees China as being on the cusp of achieving
that leading role. In his speech to the 19th Party Congress, Xi (2017b) declared that China ‘has stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong’, and that China could offer ‘Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind’. Following that speech, a more obvious domestic economic slowdown, occasioned by efforts to reduce Chinese debt levels and reform lax lending practices, as well as by the effects of the US-China trade dispute, has reduced Xi’s confidence. Yet, while he has noted the new risks and challenges facing China, Xi has continued to argue that global historical trends favour China and that, as a great country, China ought to have ‘lofty aspirations’ (xiongxin zhuang-zhi) about its role in world affairs (Medeiros, 2019; Xi, 2018).

Second, Xi’s ideas are distinctive because of the level of attention he and his leadership team have devoted to conceptualising how Chinese diplomacy can help China to achieve national rejuvenation. At the 2014 Foreign Affairs Work Conference, Xi called on China to ‘develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of [sic] a major country’ (quoted in Swaine, 2015: 5). Since then, and under the banner of, variously, the ‘Theory of Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics’ or the system of ‘Xi Jinping diplomatic thought’, Xi and his senior leaders have put forward a series of new concepts that are not only designed to guide Chinese foreign policy but, even more importantly, are designed to ‘inject’ more Chinese discourse into international affairs (Wang, 2017b, 2019: 19; Yang, 2018).

Rather than simply listing each of these new concepts in turn, instead we generalise across their range, identify what we see as the key cognitive and normative assumptions underpinning them, and illustrate how they have been made operational through discourse and empirical observation of China’s policy behaviour. The following three major themes are prominent: developmentalism, security partnerships, and the idea of sovereign equality. They have been emphasised in Xi’s world view not only because they represent the Chinese leadership’s most salient cognitive and normative assumptions about how the world does or should work, but also because they are seen as the best means of advancing China’s interests in the world. That is, in analysing Xi’s world view and policy proposals, we take the position that ideas are phenomena that can be both deeply held (for instance, as a result of ideological conviction or lessons learned from China’s historical experiences) and deployed instrumentally by policy makers seeking to advance China’s interests. In what follows, we explore each of these three dimensions of Xi’s world view, and apply them to Beijing’s relations with the major states of Japan, Russia, and the United States.

**Developmentalism**

*Background cognitive and normative world view*

A core role for development, more than any other concept, underpins Xi’s approach to domestic and foreign policy. Certainly, the idea of development – understood through Marxist-Leninist ideology and Chinese observations of past rising powers – has been a powerful driver of CCP policy since the Party came to power in 1949 (King, 2016). However, Xi has enhanced this focus on development, arguing at the 19th Party Congress that the ‘principal contradiction’ facing China at the domestic level was imbalanced and inadequate development, and Chinese citizens’ need ‘for a better life’. Consequently, Xi (2017b) explained that ‘development is the underpinning and the key for solving all our country’s problems’. Moreover Xi, more than his predecessors, has projected development as not simply a domestic policy agenda, instead articulating how development can serve as the linkage between
China’s domestic and international policies. Cognitively, he understands China’s economic development as contributing to ‘the development of the world as a whole’ (Xi, 2013c; see also for example, Xi, 2017b, 2017c), a justifiable claim in some respects given that, even under slowing domestic growth conditions, China remains the world’s largest contributor to global economic growth (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2018).

Xi has also added a strong normative dimension to his view of development, arguing that China’s development will be pursued in line with the ‘common development’ of other countries. This idea is premised on Xi’s (2013b) view that ‘sustainable development’ is not possible ‘when some countries are getting richer and richer while others languish in prolonged poverty and backwardness’. Though having its origins in China’s own historical experiences and thinking, Xi’s normative emphasis is clearly designed to appeal to the Global South. Indeed, language about ‘common development’ has been a key theme in Xi’s speeches to foreign audiences since 2013, and to developing country audiences in particular. In landmark speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia during his first year in office, Xi (2013d, 2013e) introduced the world to his plans for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and argued that China shared the same ‘strategic goals’ as fellow countries in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, namely, to achieve national rejuvenation and strength through the pursuit of economic development. This idea was further elaborated at the 2015 Bo’ao Forum for Asia, where Xi (2015) described a ‘community of common destiny’ as one in which ‘the interests of others must be accommodated while pursuing one’s own interests, and common development must be promoted while seeking one’s own development’. Xi (2015, 2017b) has also consistently argued that China’s strategies for development would be ‘open and inclusive’, rather than ‘closed’ and ‘exclusive’, thereby trying to persuade its intended economic partners that China will not pursue economic growth and development at the expense of developing countries.

Yet, there is a harder edge to Xi’s developmentalist world view, for it is one that paints China’s approach to development as sitting in competition with approaches offered under a US-led order. For instance, at the 2015 Bo’ao Forum, Xi defined his vision of a ‘community of common destiny’ and ‘win-win cooperation’ in terms of how it was distinct from ‘old mindsets’ that offered ‘zero-sum’ and self-interested approaches to development. Instead, Beijing would be ‘shouldering greater responsibilities for regional and world peace and development, as opposed to seeking greater monopoly over regional and world affairs’ (Xi, 2015). Xi’s sub-text is that China’s vision will be more beneficial to developing countries than that offered by older, established powers. Moreover, under Xi, the Chinese leadership has championed multiple paths to development for developing countries, and a development-centric view of human rights, contrasting this with a western emphasis on neoliberalism and civil and political rights. In 2013, Xi (2013a) argued in Tanzania that ‘there is no one-size-fits-all development model in the world’, while Wang Yi (2017c) has argued that the new world order ‘cannot be just dominated by capitalism and the West’. By the time of the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the Chinese leadership was not only advocating multiple paths to development, but somewhat contradictorily also endorsing the Chinese development model – socialism with Chinese characteristics – as a ‘new path’ to modernisation for ‘all developing countries’ (Wang, 2017c; Xi, 2017b).

**Foreground associated policies**

Investment in developing countries, particularly through the funding of infrastructure, has been the chief policy manifestation of Xi Jinping’s commitment to development. This
type of funding serves Xi’s domestic and foreign policy agendas, allowing the Chinese leadership not only to solve the domestic dilemma of what to do with excess domestic capacity in the heavy industry and construction sectors, but also allowing China to furnish its global leadership ambitions by supplying a key public good – infrastructure – for which there is considerable global demand. Xi’s government has invested in developing country infrastructure through the much touted BRI and its associated ‘Silk Road Fund’, as well as through a range of Chinese state and commercial banks, and through multilateral platforms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB; formerly known as the BRICS Development Bank).

In the United States, both the Obama and Trump administrations have viewed Xi’s enthusiasm for infrastructure investment as a means for China to project its influence around the globe in ways that are inimical to US interests. The Obama administration tried unsuccessfully to pressure its major allies not to become AIIB members by questioning the AIIB’s governance, and its environmental and social lending standards (Reuters, 2015b). Criticism has deepened under the Trump administration, with Vice President Pence (2018) arguing that China is using ‘debt diplomacy’ to expand its influence among developing countries. US analysts and former officials outside the Trump administration have echoed Pence’s concerns about ‘debt dependencies’ among target states; have emphasised the lack of environmental, labour, and financial standards within BRI projects; and have argued that China is investing in infrastructure such as ports that, while ostensibly commercial, will enhance Chinese military capabilities in ways that could undermine America’s own ability to project power globally (Schell and Shirk, 2019: 34).

The harder edge of Xi’s developmentalist world view has also deepened tensions in the US-China relationship. Xi has labelled China’s approach to development as ‘open’, ‘inclusive’, and ‘sustainable’ in part as a way to present China as a counterpoint to an increasingly protectionist and isolationist Trump-led United States. At the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, Xi (2017a) depicted the tremendous successes of China’s development path since the embrace of market reforms and opening-up in 1978, and called for an evolved international economic order in which the benefits of economic globalisation were shared more equally both within societies and around the globe. Xi’s views have particular global appeal at a time when the politico-economic model offered by the United States has been tarnished by the global financial crisis and there is rising inequality within developed economies. Yet, as US critics have pointed out, Xi’s rhetorical commitment to ‘openness’ is inconsistent: China expects greater economic openness on the part of other states in trade and foreign investment than it is willing to commit to itself. Moreover, Xi’s championing of the market sits in tension with his government’s state-led investment in advanced science and technology, the more prominent role he has given to state-owned enterprises in the Chinese economy, and Chinese theft of foreign intellectual property (Schell and Shirk, 2019: 9, 16–17).

China has had more success in lining up qualified support for its development policy initiatives from Japan. In June 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared that Japan was ready to extend cooperation with the BRI and the AIIB, providing that the infrastructure funded through these mechanisms is ‘open to use by all’, is procured through transparent and fair processes, is economically viable, and does not cause harm to debtor nation’s finances (Abe, 2017). Moreover in 2018, Japan agreed to jointly develop 50 infrastructure projects with China. This announcement signalled the first substantial turnaround in the China-Japan relationship which, since 2010, had
been marred by tensions in the East China Sea and the historical legacy of the Second World War (Kawashima, 2018). China’s improved ties with Japan were necessitated in part by Xi’s fears about the domestic security and social stability consequences of its economic slowdown; Japan remains China’s third largest trading partner and the most important source of foreign firms operating in China by some margin. Xi’s efforts to engage Japan on the BRI also found favour with Abe, who, unlike his US ally, has combined cooperation with competition as an attempt to make BRI conform to international standards or, in Abe’s words, a ‘common frame of thinking’ (Abe, 2017). Supportive of the idea of an ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ economic order, Abe has cautiously agreed to pursue joint infrastructure projects with China, while simultaneously increasing Japan’s own regional investments in infrastructure through the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and through trilateral cooperation with the United States and Australia (MoFA, Japan, 2018; Yoshimatsu, 2018: 723, 730). In so doing, Japan has sought to differentiate its ‘high quality’ approaches to infrastructure from those offered by China, and to reclaim Xi’s language of ‘openness’ and ‘inclusivity’ for Japan and the states with which Japan is aligned.

Of the three great powers, Russia enjoys the most formalised institutional cooperation with China’s infrastructure and development initiatives. As a fellow NDB founding member, Russia shares Xi’s vision for reforming global governance architecture, welcoming the rise of emerging market countries, and championing the World Trade Organisation as the ‘cornerstone of modern international trade’ (Xinhua, 2016). Russia also became a ‘prospective founding member’ of the AIIB in 2015, and now holds the third largest vote share in the Bank after China and India. Since 2015, Russia and China have held multiple rounds of talks to negotiate formal linkages between the BRI and Russia’s own ‘Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)’ and the two sides have signed a host of bilateral trade, finance and energy agreements since 2016 (Christoffersen, 2018: 447).

However, formal cooperation between Russia and China belies an element of competition in the bilateral relationship over Xi’s infrastructure plans. Russian President Vladimir Putin sees the BRI as an attempt by China to extend influence among Russia’s closest neighbours, to secure a ‘strategic rear area’, and to obtain a supply of industrial raw materials in Russia’s Far East, and is uncomfortable with China taking the lead on the integration of the BRI and EAEU. Subsequently, Putin has sought to counterbalance China’s BRI by putting forward his expansive though still nascent proposal for a ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’; by pursuing closer economic ties with Japan in order to diversify Russian sources of foreign investment; and by taking care to portray China and Russia as ‘equal negotiating partners’ on the BRI and EAEU (Christoffersen, 2018: 444–450).

Beyond infrastructure, development has also become central to the Chinese leadership’s view of human rights and the specific policies it has pursued in this domain. In 2017, while hosting the first ever ‘South-South Forum on Human Rights’, Foreign Minister Wang Yi identified the right to development as ‘the primary human right for developing countries’ (Wang, 2017d). At the UN’s Human Rights Council in 2017, for the first time, China introduced a resolution entitled ‘the Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of all Human Rights’, a resolution that split the Council with western states voting against (A/HRC/RES/35, 2017). Importantly, China underpins the priority given to development with an argument that success depends on ensuring domestic social stability and an emphasis on state-identified collective, predominantly economic, rights rather than individual rights (Xi, 2017c). Beijing has, therefore, championed goals such as the eradication of poverty and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a way
of boosting domestic stability. In its view, development is the fundamental right from which others may flow (Foot, 2016b: 940–941; Foot, 2020). In this stance, China lines up with Russia, which shares China’s position in calling for more emphasis to be given to economic development rights, and opposing evolution of the norm of ‘the Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) in such a direction that would allow large-scale human rights abuses to be used as an ‘excuse’ for interference in countries’ internal affairs (Xinhua, 2016).

China’s linkage of human rights and development also finds some favour in Japan, where the limitations posed by Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution and by strong domestic attachment to the norm of pacifism, have led Japan to focus on ‘human’ and other non-traditional forms of security in its foreign and security policy since the 1990s. Importantly, in terms of Tokyo’s and Beijing’s alignment in this area of policy, Japan’s interpretation of ‘human security’ emphasises ‘freedom from want’ over ‘freedom from fear’ with Abe placing emphasis on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals in his ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ policy (Abe, 2015).

However, China’s position sows even further divisions between it and the United States, and a distinct mismatch in the United States and Chinese discourse on human rights. While Xi’s China promotes improved standards of living, access to clean drinking water and other sustainable development goals in its human rights agenda, the United States instead homes in on Xi’s failure to protect civil and political rights, describing China as ‘more explicitly in opposition to liberal values’ under Xi’s tenure as a result of creeping authoritarianism, imprisonment of human rights lawyers, and the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (Schell and Shirk, 2019: 9; Pence, 2018).

Security partnerships

Background cognitive and normative world view

The security framework developed under Xi relates closely with the leadership’s beliefs about the positive role that development can play in generating not only regime security but also state and international security. Although protecting the security of the regime is depicted as important to many of China’s developing world partners (as well as to Russia), it is also important to a one-Party system like China’s that spends more on internal security than on external security, and which views economic development as the trade-off under which China’s citizens continue to tolerate one-Party rule. Sound development practices are understood, then, as both a source of domestic political security and social stability, as well as crucial to the establishment of international peace and security. As Xi put it in May 2014, for example, ‘development is the foundation of security, and security the precondition for development’, adding for good measure that for security to be sustainable and ‘durable’ it was necessary to ‘focus on both development and security’. In reference to the needs of Asia, Xi explained, ‘[f]or most Asian countries, development means the greatest security and the master key to regional security issues’ (Ferchen, 2016; Xi, 2014). In a 2018 article, state councillor Yang Jiechi noted that China’s objective of building a community of shared destiny was not only aimed at achieving the world’s common development, but also a strategy to safeguard world peace (Yang, 2018).

Xi has also laid emphasis on China’s ‘new security concept’, an idea first outlined in the late 1990s, but given more attention after 2014 because of its particular focus on the creation of a new security architecture for Asia. As Xi put it,
We believe that it is necessary to advocate common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia. We need to innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a road for security of Asia that is shared by all and win-win to all.

While the translation of this next phrase is under debate (Jakobson, 2016: 220), Xi (2014) added: ‘in the final analysis [or ultimately], it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia’.

Cooperative security in the Chinese leadership’s definition necessarily implies the replacement of alliances – notably, those between the United States and its allies in North and Southeast Asia – that target particular opponents. The idea of cooperative- or partnership-based security stems from China’s experiences of alliances during the Cold War, and Xi’s cognitive view of the way in which US alliances enhanced the security of the United States and its allies, while undermining that of China. As Xi (2017c) pointed out in a speech in Geneva, ‘[n]o country in the world can enjoy absolute security. A country cannot have security while others are in turmoil’. Instead, China advocates the establishment of a ‘global partnership network’. According to China, to create global partnerships requires different forms and levels of cooperation with all the world’s constituencies, from the major states to the developing world.

The security framework also requires a high priority be given to protection of China’s territorial integrity and national unity under the leadership of the CCP. Xi has emphasised protection of China’s ‘core interests’, to include a defining role for the Party (as he stated at the 19th Party Congress, ‘[t]he Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavour in every part of the country’ (Xi, 2017b)), and the development of a strong military with a war-fighting capacity able to engender the respect of others for the country’s sovereign claims. As Yang Jiechi put it in September 2013: ‘President Xi has stressed that while firmly committed to peaceful development, we definitely must not forsake our legitimate interests or compromise our core national interests’. He went on, ‘No country should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that undermines our sovereignty, security and development interests’. Under Xi, the definition of the country’s core interests has broadened and the enforcement of sovereignty claims has been tackled with greater vigour (Economy, 2018: 201–202). Leading officials refer regularly to expected regional deference to China’s core interests as a ‘principled bottom line’ that brooks no opposition (quoted in Heath, 2013). Beijing has also emphasised its fears of a world order that rejects diverse ways of governing, allows for unilateral military intervention outside the remit of the UN Security Council, or otherwise interferes in a country’s domestic affairs as a route to destabilising domestic societies.

These, then, are some of the broad background cognitive and normative ideas that have shaped security thinking in the period of Xi Jinping. Inevitably, many of these aspects are self-serving as in the overriding role given to a supervisory Communist Party; others have been interpreted inconsistently as in the cases of China’s use of informal sanctions against South Korea during debates over the establishment of the US THAAD system to protect against North Korean missile attacks, or Russia’s takeover of Crimea which led to Chinese statements that indicated its ‘understanding’ of these Russian moves (Wishnick, 2018: 370). Above all, these ideas relate to China’s seeming determination to weaken or delegitimise the current form of the United States presence in the Asia-Pacific region as well as Washington’s presumed hegemonic role in maintaining global order.
**Foreground associated policies**

Indeed, the United States is frequently the sub-text of the security world view outlined here. For example, Xi’s May 2014 speech also included the sentence: ‘One cannot live in the 21st century with the outdated thinking from the age of Cold War and zero-sum game’, an argument that has been referenced in many Chinese official speeches and that is directed at the US alliance framework in the Asia-Pacific. Beijing’s statements have also struck at the US refrain that it is the benign hegemon in the Asia-Pacific, that for 70 years ’has played a vital role in undergirding regional peace, stability, and security’ and in enabling ‘tremendous prosperity and economic growth’ (U.S. Department of Defence (DoD), 2018). In the Xi era, and particularly after the formal introduction of the 2011 US ‘rebalance’ policy to Asia, China has argued that America’s military surveillance and naval manoeuvres, together with its reinvigoration of alliances, particularly, that with Japan, are disruptive of regional order. US criticisms of China’s human rights practices are interpreted as a deliberate threat to China’s domestic political system. Various, China has described these actions as designed to weaken, possibly to otherthrow, CCP rule, or contain China’s rise, divide the region into friends and enemies, and embolden Japan as well as China’s other Asian neighbours into reckless behaviour over sovereignty disputes (Foot, 2016a: 9–11; Zhou, 2016: 208–209).

Undoubtedly, contention between the United States and China has risen sharply in the Xi Jinping era in all areas of the relationship. However, their strategic competition is influenced by a number of contradictory trends that complicate China’s policy-making environment. China has developed a military position in the Asia-Pacific that constrains some of a still-predominant America’s military and strategic choices, but China ranks second only to North America as a US export market despite an unfavourable trade balance that is the focus of difficult and so far unproductive China-US negotiations. For China, meanwhile, the United States remains its major single-state trading partner, and it does not see a trade war as in China’s interests. Beijing has tried restraint in its responses to the Trump administration’s economic actions, but it has also made it increasingly clear that it is prepared to fight a trade war (Medeiros, 2019; State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), 2019).

These contradictory trends are reflected in official Chinese depictions of the United States. Foreign Minister Wang Yi in his annual round-up of China’s diplomatic action in 2017 described the contacts between Presidents Xi and Trump as providing a ‘strategic anchor to what is the most complicated and consequential relationship in the world’, but he also called on the United States to ‘accept a China that is following its own path of socialism with Chinese characteristics’, noting that the world (or more accurately if implicitly, the China-US relationship) was at a ‘crossroads of history’ and facing questions of ‘openness or isolation, cooperation or confrontation, win-win or [a] zero-sum game’ (Wang, 2017a).

That anchoring is increasingly adrift. Three years into the Trump administration, the Chinese government has appeared to give up on arresting the deterioration in bilateral ties, with the 2017 US National Security Strategy (U.S. NSS, 2017) as well as the US National Defense Strategy (U.S. DoD, 2018: 2) both depicting China as a key rival and, according to the DOD, as ‘leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries’. Washington no longer perceives the economic interdependence between the two countries as working to bind them together at times of strategic tension, and Beijing sees the United States as intent on containing its influence and blocking its rise. As Wu Xinbo (2018) has put it, the stabilisation previously
provided by China-US economic ties has given way to a perception that the economic relationship favours China and represents a major challenge to the prosperity and security of the United States. In particular, there is strong competition over the new frontiers of technology – important economically as well as militarily – and which of the two countries will be the first fully to exploit them (Foot and King, 2019).

This deterioration in China-US relations is in marked contrast to China’s relationship with Russia, a partner that Beijing alleges is like a ‘ballast stone in safeguarding global and regional peace and stability’ (Wishnick, 2018: 359), but which significantly also shares Beijing’s view on the need to safeguard domestic regime security against western-led interventionist forces. Xi has led this relationship towards a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era’, the pinnacle of China’s classification system for its foreign relations (Xinhua, 2019). Each accords great respect to the other, with President Putin given the honour to speak first at any international gathering that China hosts, as appropriate for someone Xi has described as his ‘best, most intimate friend’ (Lo, 2019: 1–2). At a time of western sanctions and diplomatic chastisement of Russia, China chose to award Putin its Medal of Friendship and later Russia returned the favour awarding Xi in 2017, the highest order of Russia. Putin has also made some attempt to undercut the underlying rivalries in this asymmetric relationship with China, inviting Xi to be the first Chinese President to attend Russia’s annual Eastern Economic Forum meeting in Vladivostok in 2018 (Yu, 2019), and elsewhere stating ‘the main struggle, which is now underway is that for global leadership and we are not going to contest China on this’ (Allison, 2018).

Bobo Lo (2019: 4–5) regards developments such as these as mostly rhetorical rather than substantive and the structural asymmetry in the relationship as a continuing source of tension. However, in the current international circumstances, the two governments have worked to give ballast to Russian statements that this is a ‘trust-based partnership’, with the Chinese PLA being invited in 2018 and 2019 to Russia’s largest military exercises since Soviet times. Deploying some 3200 PLA forces in 2018 and 1600 in 2019 – record numbers for China to send to military exercises overseas – the PLA participated in operations to expel the “illegal forces” of a hostile state or group of states’ as well as counter-terrorist activities. According to the Moscow Times in 2018, this was the first time that Russia had invited a foreign country that is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to take part in such an exercise (see also Gady, 2019). Russia has also implicitly endorsed China’s sovereignty concerns associated with disputed claims in the South and East China seas, participating in naval drills with the Chinese navy in these waters in 2016 and 2017, and joint aerial patrols in 2019 (Gady, 2019; Yu, 2019: 116–119). Moreover, Russian arms deals with China show a willingness now to provide Russia’s most sophisticated equipment, where once that had been denied to China, but not to India (Cox, 2018: 340).

The basis for this high level of strategic cooperation in the current era rests on a strong alignment in their security perspectives with both fearing an interventionist West supportive of regime change in their own societies given the political authoritarian models that they both have established and espoused. Western interventionist rhetoric and behaviour associated with ideas such as the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) add to the sense of threat, backed up by western support for the ‘colour revolutions’ and ‘Arab Spring’, and role in the overthrow of both Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. They perceive the United States as able and often willing to engage in unilateral uses of force outside the structure of the UN Security Council, the one global governance mechanism that through veto power provides them both with some means of equalising
relationships in a hierarchical world. From their respective security perspectives, it is imperative to work together to ‘maintain the UN’s authority and core status in international affairs’ (MoFA, China, 2017).

The chances of China developing these levels of trust or stability in relations with Japan are, of course, far slimmer if not impossible. China-Japan relations have improved since the serious deterioration in 2010 as a result of the clash between a Chinese trawler and Japanese naval vessel in disputed waters, the Japanese decision to nationalise three of the islands in the Senkaku/Diaoyu island chain in 2012, and the stepping up of Chinese sea and air patrols in the vicinity of the disputed territory. However, China’s security thinking does not afford much basis for establishing deep forms of trust with Japan. Certainly, Xi has made it clear that to achieve ‘rejuvenation’, China will need to manage its regional sovereignty disputes, and establish crisis management mechanisms in order that conflict can be avoided (Heath, 2013), and these aims have been furthered in recent discussions with Japan’s leaders. For example, during Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Japan in May 2018, the two sides announced a Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism to establish rules for direct communication in the event of accidental military clashes at sea between Chinese and Japanese vessels and to set up a military hot line (Xiao, 2019). During Prime Minister Abe’s visit to China in October 2018, the two sides agreed additional military confidence building measures, and more ambitiously to realign their relationship in accordance with such principles as ‘shifting from competition to cooperation’, and ‘forging a relationship as partners, not as threats’ (Kawashima, 2018).

However, despite these potentially helpful developments, Japan’s attempts at internal and external balancing during the Xi era have cut across the Chinese leadership’s expressed view that the balance of power should be replaced with cooperative networked partnerships. Thus, instead of moving away from the US alliance and towards ideas of cooperative security as China claims as its key normative goal, Japan in 2015 signed with the US revised ‘Guidelines for Defense Cooperation’, the first such revision since 1997, and in a Joint Statement, the two allies reaffirmed the ‘indispensable role of the Japan-U.S. Alliance in promoting regional peace, and security’. Of particular import to Japan, that Joint Statement also included an unequivocal pledge that the Senkaku Islands are covered ‘within the scope of the commitments under Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security’ – a pledge repeated by the Trump administration. Tokyo has reciprocated and has put itself forward as a key supporter of Washington’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the resurrected Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving Japan and the United States together with Australia and India.

Bringing Japan in to support China’s world view on security matters is, therefore, far more of a challenge than is the case with Russia. Tokyo’s long-standing alliance relationship with the United States, its suspicions of deepened Chinese-Russian ties, the territorial disputes and historical grievances that are on-going with China, together with Japan’s identification with the democratic world, all throw up obstacles to the declared desire to move towards ‘a relationship as partners, not as threats’. For any improvement in ties, much depends on the economic relationship and Japan’s involvement with the BRI, as an earlier section has established.

### Sovereign equality

**Background cognitive and normative world view**

A final major element of Xi’s world view involves the concept of legal sovereign equality. China’s leadership has long demonstrated its attachment to protecting state sovereignty,
but since 2013, there has been particular mention of the benefits of a world order based on the notion of the sovereign equality of states. In many respects, this idea fits with China’s cognitive understanding, based on its own historical experiences, of the sources of insecurity in world politics – the notion that sovereign equality provides some protection in a world otherwise marked by hierarchy. As Xi has explained Chinese thinking, ‘[s]overeign equality is the most important norm governing state-to-state relations over the past centuries and the cardinal principle observed by the United Nations and all other international organizations’. Its essence is that the ‘sovereignty and dignity of all countries, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, must be respected, their internal affairs allow no interference and they have the right to independently choose their social system and development path’ (Xi, 2017c).

Associated with these ideas of a pluralist state-based world order is new normative emphasis on the concepts of ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’, especially important when the Xi era leadership considers how best to reform global governance (Yang, 2018). China’s Foreign Minister (Wang, 2017a) has defined justice in terms of non-interference in internal affairs and rejection of the imposition of the demands of the strong on the weak in world politics. Fairness is related to the idea of expanding the voice of the weaker states in global governance and the rebalancing of international organisations in order to decrease the decision-making weight of the western world. In China’s view, only through the adoption of these ideas can the world truly move towards a ‘shared community of humankind’.

These ideas clearly underpin China’s strong support for the United Nations which its official statements frequently describe as playing an ‘indispensable role in international affairs’. Beijing also sees the UN as ‘the most universal, representative, authoritative inter-governmental international organization . . . the best venue to practice multilateralism, and an effective platform for collective actions to cope with various threats and challenges’ (MoFA, China, 2005). It is a perspective on the UN that also coheres with its security world view, with the UN Charter, and particularly Article 2(7) which stresses the domestic jurisdiction of state members, being interpreted as a weapon to use against interventionist principles that could result in regime change.

**Foreground associated policies**

These ideas map on strongly to Russia’s perspectives helping to align Beijing’s and Moscow’s policies at the UN on such topics as R2P and the crisis in Syria. In addition, they have chosen jointly to promote the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a model example of a new global governance mechanism that has protected the principle of non-interference, focused on stability, and supported diversity (Cox, 2018: 336).

One clear China-Russia statement equating legal sovereign equality with their own interpretation of non-interference came in a Declaration signed in June 2016 (MoFA, Russia, 2016) during Putin’s visit to Beijing. The Declaration stated the two sides’ ‘full commitment’ to the UN Charter, and the guidance ‘enshrined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’. It also reaffirmed the principle of sovereign equality as ‘crucial for the stability of international relations’, stressing in particular, the importance of equal treatment, and mutual respect. In one of its most explicit passages, it noted the import of the principle of non-intervention and condemned as ‘a violation of this principle any interference by States in the internal affairs of other States with the aim of forging change of legitimate governments’.

The sub-text, as in many areas associated with Xi’s world view again was directed at western interventionist practices, the particular sanctions then being imposed on Russia,
and the condemnation and reactive behaviour that China had attracted as a result of its creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea. For the United States, China’s actions in the South China Sea raised questions about how best to protect freedom of navigation in waters that China looked set soon to be able to control. A constant refrain from US administrations has been that the United States will ‘fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows’, in the South China Sea (e.g. Reuters, 2015a). This intention to operate has been enforced with greater vigour during the Trump era, and has gained the enthusiastic support of the Abe administration. Tokyo too has joined with the United States in military exercises emphasising amphibious operations, including practicing the recapture of an island, and is also on record as reaffirming the importance of maintaining a ‘rules-based order in the maritime domain based on the principles of international law, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea’ (UK-Japan Defence Ministerial Meeting, 2017).

Neither are Chinese suspicions of Japan diminished by its championing of a postwar international order in which the United States has played a hegemonic role, as well as its references to a ‘rules-based order’ based on liberal democratic principles. Moreover, China’s defensive references to the sovereign equality of nations as a fundamental principle in IR, one that undergirds the UN Charter, would not be the focus of Japanese statements on the United Nations. Instead, Japan prefers to emphasise the UN’s collective endeavours with which it has engaged throughout the UN system, including the protection and promotion of human security (e.g. Abe, 2015).

Conclusion

Xi’s ambitious global agenda – articulated through a world view rooted in developmentalism, security partnerships, and sovereign equality – has decisively shaped China’s relations with the United States, Russia, and Japan. Yet, Xi’s world view – and the associated policies that flow from it – has prompted a spectrum of responses from the three states.

At one end of the spectrum is Russia, where Xi and Putin’s world views align particularly closely around the vision of a more pluralist state-based world order based on sovereign equality and non-interference by the West in other country’s internal affairs. Despite some friction between China and Russia over the BRI and China’s increased presence in Russia’s immediate neighbourhood, this is the most positive of the three relationships because of the alignment in world views.

At the other end of the spectrum is the United States, where Xi’s world view has met greatest resistance. By describing the US-led order as ‘self-interested’ and ‘hegemonic’, and presenting a more exclusionary vision of Asian security cooperation architecture that undermines the United States forward operating presence, Xi has attempted to circumcribe the legitimacy of US regional and global leadership. In its most ambitious form, Beijing has offered an alternative, and what it sees as a successful, politico-economic model superior to that of a flailing western-led liberal capitalism, with the former built on a combination of economic development, support for the government in power, and an emphasis on domestic social stability. More parochially, Xi’s failure more fully to open China’s own economy, and actions that place greater emphasis on defending the country’s ‘core interests’, particularly with regard to the enforcement of China’s sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, add to this sense of a challenge to US hegemony. When combined, the policies emanating from Xi’s world view have resulted in a pronounced downturn in China’s relations with the United States.
Japan lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. As a US ally, Tokyo shares Washington’s concerns about Xi’s efforts to undermine the US-led order in Asia, particularly at a time when Japan views China as a growing security threat. Yet, there are areas where China’s and Japan’s world views come into closer alignment. Xi’s support for infrastructure investment in Asia and his championing of an ‘open’ economic order has found some favour in Japan precisely because of Tokyo’s alarm that a sharp deterioration in the US-China economic relationship will undermine the global economy in ways that are also harmful to Japan. Of the three states, then, Japan has been perhaps the most successful in selectively engaging with Xi’s world view where it benefits Japan, while simultaneously pursuing competitive balancing strategies that might help to bolster Japan’s preferred order.

Ultimately, our analysis of Xi’s world view and its impact on China’s relations with the great powers reveals the loftiness of Xi’s ambitions but also the limitations facing his global agenda. In his calls for a plural, open, and development-focused world order, Xi has been more successful than previous generations of Chinese leaders in articulating a world view that is less inward looking. Instead, he has paid notable attention to the ambitions and interests of the developing world. Yet, Xi’s world view still demonstrates a failure to understand how the interests of the great powers might serve to frustrate China’s ambitions. Xi has failed to reassure the United States in particular, but also Japan, that his world view is of mutual benefit to them, and that their security and prosperity can be preserved in what might become a more China-centred world, with Beijing aligned closely with an increasingly authoritarian Russian government.

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