Introduction: A Xi change in policy?

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Abstract
Have China’s international relations changed fundamentally under Xi Jinping? Or is it rather a matter of heading in the same direction as before, but with a considerable increase in pace accompanied by a greater confidence in outlining where this journey is taking China (and as a consequence, the world as well)? This introduction outlines some of the collective conclusions of the special issue as a whole, and in explaining the rationale for constructing it, pays tribute to John Peterson’s contribution and support.

Keywords
China, China’s international relations, China’s rise, global order, John Peterson, Xi Jinping

This special issue owes its existence to the late and much missed John Peterson. In his capacity as editor of this journal, he not only thought that the time was right to have an assessment of this type, but he was clear about some of the ways it should be put together as well.¹ For example, he was keen to avoid simply focusing on US perceptions of the admittedly very important Sino–US bilateral relationship as some sort of proxy for the study of China’s changing global role per se. Clearly, this academic ‘usual suspect’ should not and, indeed, could not be ignored. But there is more to the world and China’s place it than this bilateralism (even though it is probably the most important bilateral relationship of the current era), and the scope of scholarship needed to reflect this. He was even more keen to ensure that this was not just an analysis of China from the outside either, and wanted to see a real partnership that included Chinese voices and perceptions. And in keeping with his commitment to mentoring and nurturing future generations of scholars, it was to be a collection that would include scholars at rather different stages of their careers. We have tried our best to live up to his vision, and dedicate this special issue to his memory and hope that we have not let him down.

While the issue of China’s rise has long been a subject of interest across the International Relations (IR) community, this special issue was commissioned at a time when a key change seemed to be taking place. The idea that this rise could be a threat to the United

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States or the Asian region or to the global order (or all of the above) had first begun to gain a decent sized following in the early to mid 1990s. As the possibility of China’s potential isolation in the aftermath of Tiananmen gave way to a new era of reform in 1992 with Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour (the nanxun) kick starting liberalising economic reforms, attention soon turned to where this new direction might lead. For the most part, the focus was on China’s domestic political and economic evolution, given the political turmoil at home of the summer of 1989, and the unravelling of communist party rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that had begun later the same year. But the external consequences of this change in direction also soon became clear too, leading to questions of what a changed China might mean for others as well. The year 1993 saw more foreign investment going to China than in all of the previous years of the post-Mao reform era put together. This shift played a significant role in generating another one, with Chinese exports more than doubling in value in the space of 5 years. It is no coincidence that these changes occurred at the same time that Overholt (1993) saw signs of China emerging as a new economic superpower that could – indeed, probably would – come to rival the United States, and Friedberg (1993–1994) and Roy (1994) were predicting trouble ahead for regional security as a result of this ongoing transformation.

In general, this idea of a China challenge or threat found it easier to garner support in the United States and in parts of Asia than it did elsewhere. Immediately, we have to qualify this broad-brush statement by noting that it represents a massive over-generalisation. Not everybody in the United States or the region thought this way, and of course, there were people in other parts of the world who also thought of China as providing some sort of potential future challenge. This included in Europe where, for example, the logic of engaging an illiberal political economy and allowing China relatively easy access to Western markets was very much a live topic of debate. What a certain type of Chinese economic rise might do to the global environmental commons was also identified relatively early on as something to worry about. That said, the chances of European states being directly drawn into some sort of traditional security confrontation with China looked rather remote; and much less likely than for either a number of China’s regional neighbours or, through its regional security reach and alliances, the United States. And notwithstanding some concerns about China’s growing global economic clout, for a number of years the emphasis in Europe tended to be on the potential opportunities that an ongoing China rise could present to European states and companies. As perhaps best epitomised by the United Kingdom’s drive to create a new ‘Golden Age’ of relations with China under Osborne and Cameron in the early-mid 2010s, this at times, spurred competition between Europeans to gain the best possible access to what this world of opportunities might offer as China continued to rise.

But things change. Among other things, John was a scholar of Europe’s place in the world. And what he and many others observed was a rather rapid and significant shift in the nature of overarching and big picture thinking on China in Europe. It is hard to put an exact date on when the change took hold. While many European countries saw attracting Chinese finance as a potential way out of economic problems after the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, it did not take too long for questions to emerge over what a greater Chinese financial presence in Europe might mean. Perhaps, the turning point was the establishment of the 16 + 1 process in 2012 which provided a new institutional platform for China to build relations with a group of Central and Eastern European countries that was taken by some as a sign of Chinese intent to change (some) European loyalties (Casarini, 2016). Or perhaps, it was the way that the Belt and Road was promoted in and
after 2013 that increased awareness (and wariness) of Chinese commitments to changing economic geographies (and maybe more) beyond its own regional back yard and into the back yards of others (Grieger, 2018: 3). Or maybe it was the growth of Chinese investment more generally in the mid 2010s, and in particular, the focus on acquiring hi-tech European assets in 2015 and 2016 in more advanced European economies (and even more particularly, German assets). Or it could have been the State Council’s (2015) unveiling of the ‘Made in China 2025’ blueprint for industrial and technological upgrading, which seemed to be designed to make an already uneven economic playing field more uneven still at a time when Europeans (and others) were asking for greater reciprocity in market access (not less of it).4 Or perhaps, it was a less specific and more general greater confidence in China’s leaders to establish and disseminate their preferences for the way that the global order should be organised; preferences in some issue areas (such as human rights) that left Europe and China on different sides of the debate. Most likely, it was a combination of all of these. What is clear is that even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of a new National Security Law for Hong Kong in 2020 shone new (and not particularly favourable) lights on China, the idea that China had become a ‘systemic rival’ to Europe had already been officially endorsed.5

John observed much of this change at firsthand in Brussels. But while he had specialist knowledge of Europe, he never studied Europe in isolation from the rest of the world and he knew that this change in thinking was far from unique to Europe. Indeed, in addition to sharing European concerns about China’s potential political economy and global order challenges, in Australia and New Zealand concern over potential Chinese influence in domestic political affairs had arguably resulted in even more fundamental rethinks (Brady, 2017). Different countries and regions might have seen their China relationships change in different ways, but very few seemed to be simply carrying on as if nothing had changed. So when he asked us if we would be interested in putting together a special issue on China, he had a very simple question. What had driven this change? And underpinning this question was a prior one; given that the most dramatic changes seemed to have occurred after Xi Jinping became party leader in 2012, was it all simply down to a change of leadership and Xi’s personal policy agenda? Hence, the idea of a collection on whether there had been a ‘Xi-Change’ in Chinese foreign policy; though it is only fair to point out that the pun on a sea-change was not his, and one of the editors of this special issue has to take the full responsibility for that.6

A Xi-change?

So what is the answer? Maybe it is not for us as (guest) editors to say, and we should let the individual papers speak for themselves. Beyond the question of whether Xi’s assumption of power can be identified as marking a substantial change in policy, we did not impose any prior prescriptions or proscriptions on what the authors should look at, or establish methodological and/or theoretical preferences. Indeed, the collection contains examples of a range of different modus operandi when it comes to studying China’s international relations. If nothing else, this special issue acts as a means of showcasing diversity within what should probably be thought of as China studies communities in the plural; it certainly does not just repeat the rather blunt dichotomisation between realist and liberal starting points (and expected end points too) that has been at the core of a significant amount of IR and security studies of the consequences of China’s rise over the years.
That said, it would be a bit odd if we had no opinion of our own. And fortunately, there are a number of commonalities that cut across the individual papers that do provide an answer of sorts to the question of whether it’s all down to Xi. They also allow us to draw some other collective conclusions too.

Not surprisingly, given that the first and most important question that we put before the paper writers was to do with leadership change, the papers collectively tend to focus more on domestic drivers of change rather than the systemic ones that are often the drivers of IR scholarship on China’s changing global role. Even so, there is a broad recognition that the world is not just there to be changed at China’s bidding, and what others do – or indeed, do not do – should not be overlooked (but sometimes is). Other countries have agency, and what they do in response to what China does – particularly, but not only, in Southeast Asia – has a massive impact on whether Chinese actions do what they were intended to do. In the case of North Korea, it is not just a case of others reacting to what China does as China in some respects (and at some times) reacting to the goals and actions of others. In this case, not just North Korea itself, but the other major powers involved in seeking solutions to instability on the Korean peninsula too. It might seem so obvious that the actions and agency of others are important that such an observation does not need repeating here. But in at least some of the observations of China’s international interactions in recent years, the emphasis on China has been so strong and so all-consuming that the agency of others is indeed written out of the discussion (or marginalised, or discounted). Some assertions of the deliberate deployment of a Chinese ‘debt-trap’ diplomatic strategy might be good examples. As such, we think a brief restatement of the obvious here is justified, even though it probably should not be necessary.

Moreover, if the liberal order really exists, and if its authority, legitimacy, and dominance are now being challenged, the roots of many of these challenges are internal rather than (just) from China. The Trump administration’s decisions to pull the United States back from global leadership in some issue areas and to turn its back on some multilateral institutions of global governance are the most often sighted and cited causes of exogenous change creating spaces for China to operate in. It is not just a matter of creating gaps in the provision of global governance and/or global public goods that China can try to fill, but also that the moral and ethical authority of the broader ‘liberal’ global order takes a hit at the same time. Of course, things will undoubtedly change during the Biden Presidency. But in terms of building confidence in China in what might be done, and also in terms of creating gaps that have already being (partially at least) filled, then what has already been done will be very difficult to undo.

Moreover, despite the understandable focus on recent events, it is a process of decline that predates the election of Donald Trump. Some see the roots of the liberal global order’s relative decline (or at least US leadership of it) in intervention in the Middle East and North Africa under George W Bush. The process of trying to build alliances for the pursuit of interventionism in the first place, and then the subsequent consequences of it for stability in the region, are said to have combined to mark the beginnings of the end of unipolarity (Zhang, 2012), creating a ‘period of strategic opportunity’ that allowed China to become more proactive in its attempts to attain core objectives (Xu, 2014). More often, it is typical for analyses in China of China’s place in the world to refer to the global financial crisis as representing some sort of turning point. It is also typical – or more correctly, common – for them to refer to it as an ‘international’ financial crisis, as the roots of this crisis were not thought to be truly universal and global but instead found specifically in a certain type of capitalist regulation (or the lack of it). It was a crisis that saw some asymmetries in global
hierarchies flip; between China and Europe perhaps or China and Australia. Although it was not a tipping point where China replaced the United States as the predominant global force, it was certainly one that has been described as marking the point that the United States was no longer free to order and rule the world at will (Yu, 2012). From this viewpoint, China’s success in dealing with the secondary impact of the crisis on its economy subsequently helped validate the efficacy of its mode of economic management, and increasingly also its decision-making capacity and political system. Fukayama, it seemed, had not so much been premature in identifying the end of history, as wrong. China had proved that non-Western and non-neoliberal alternatives were not only surviving, but in the good story of China that its leaders want the world to hear, able to deliver developmental successes, and provide resilience that other previously dominant ‘models’ have not delivered; and in some tellings of this story, perhaps fundamentally cannot deliver (Yang, 2016).

Continuation and continuities

We can draw three conclusions from this very brief discussion. The first is that those who are concerned about challenges to the liberal global order – whatever that might entail – need to not only look at the challengers, but at what the supposed stakeholders and proponents of that liberal order have done. If there has been a significant shift in Chinese foreign policy – and as will become clear, we think there has – it is not all down to what China has done alone. The policy choices of other leaders have played a role too, and we should probably add in the electoral decisions of voters in some countries too. They have collectively created a room for manoeuvre for China – and other rising powers – to operate in that was not as obviously there before. And the legitimacy of certain ways of thinking and the efficacy of certain preferences for organising the world have also been questioned. Or at the very least, they have created the sense in China – and elsewhere – that this space and this questioning now exist.

Second, and more important for answering the question we set ourselves, if there has been a fundamental shift in the way that China and its leaders see the world (and China’s place within it), then it was a shift that was underway before Xi assumed the party leadership in 2012 (and the state Presidency the following year). To be sure, as Vice President, Xi was part of the power structure at the centre of Chinese politics during his predecessor’s tenure and did not just emerge from nowhere in 2012. And as Gong and Zha note in their contribution, he was particularly active in relations with Southeast Asia during this Vice Presidency. Even so, it is important to point to continuities with what came before rather than just focussing on newness under Xi.

Jiang Zemin had first spoken of the emergence of an important period of strategic opportunity (zhongyao zhanlue jiyu qi) for China to act in 2002 (Jiang, 2002). Some analysts credited him with making the decisive break from Deng Xiaoping’s previous emphasis on ‘taoguang yanghui’ or keeping a low profile in global politics towards a new era of ‘striving for achievements’ (Zheng and Tok, 2007). Others point to initiatives under his successor (and Xi’s predecessor) Hu Jintao instead as signs of start of a new era (Zhao, 2010). The emphasis on China’s pre-revolutionary and ancient past as a source of Chinese wisdom that is often associated with Xi (and repeated by him) was also something that Hu pioneered (Kallio, 2016: 18). And while Xi has associated himself with the need to ‘tell China’s story well, spread China’s voice well, let the world know a three-dimensional, colourful China’, it was Hu Jintao who first established the importance of enhancing ‘the
soft power of our country’ in his speech to the 17th Party Congress in 2007. Indeed, as Shambaugh (2013) notes, the origins of debates over why China needed soft power (and how it might get it) date back to 1993 in what was then a primarily academic discussion, but one which made its way into policy discussions at the centre of Chinese politics before Xi himself did.

It is also worth noting that a new era of Chinese ‘assertiveness’ had not only been identified but also contested (Johnston, 2013), and the process of establishing what Chinese ‘core interests’ were that had to be defended at all costs was well under way before Xi took control (Swaine, 2010). And remembering the caveat that Xi was part of the policy process before he became the top leader, the formal decision to actively seek reform of global economic governance, and to loudly trumpet this goal, was enshrined in the 12th Five Year Plan which came into force in 2011.

. . . Innovations and change

So this second collective conclusion points to continuity. The third one, however, points to Xi-induced change. And while this might seem to be a contradiction, we do not think it is. The understanding that times and power relationships were creating opportunities for China to be a more active global power in pursuit of its objectives existed before Xi took power. The power resources that might be used to attain these goals had also been previously identified and put in place too. And yet, as the papers in this collection show, under Xi, things have moved into a new gear in ways that really do mark his tenure as representing a new era of sorts. There has been a concentration of some previous thinking, an acceleration of some previous trends, and the introduction of new policies, structures, and ideas to further pre-existing objectives.

Most basically, we have seen a move from a primarily defensive stance to a more pro-active and almost campaigning one. Actually, this is not quite true as promoting China’s preferences for others to follow has a defensive intent too. Developing a broader shared acceptance of Chinese views to further dilute the efficacy of oppositional ‘universalist’ ones further undermines the ability of others to impose their preferences on China. Even if other countries do not endorse and support Chinese positions, if enough of them reject Western ones then it creates a sort of ‘herd immunity’ against liberal preferences and prescriptions.

Perhaps, it is more correct to argue that there has been a new confidence to not only express dissatisfaction with the nature of the existing global order – the distribution of power within it and also some of the norms and principles that are meant to underpin it – but to do something about changing it. Notwithstanding the 2011 commitment to seek global governance reform, Ruan Zongze (2015) points to the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in November 2014 as the symbolic turning point. For Ruan, this conference marked the point when Xi established his vision for China’s new global role built on a new ‘diplomatic identity’ as a global governance reformer. Certainly, by the time of the 19th Party Congress when Xi (2017a) proclaimed that China was now ‘closer to the centre of the world stage than ever before’, it was possible to identify a number of different strands of this new diplomatic identity. And that is exactly what the papers in this collection do.

This has included the active provision of more global public goods. As Freeman notes, it is not that long ago that China was being criticised for not doing enough and not providing the sort of things that a global power should be providing. Ren also points to President Trump’s desire for China to use its power to do more to bring about change in North Korea. So, it is perhaps a little ironic that China has been criticised when it has not acted
as a Great Power ‘should’, and then criticised again when it has. As the various individual contributions show, this has taken a number of forms; the delivery of regional peace, the promotion and delivery of security from non-traditional threats, the creation of new financial/development institutions, the provision of bilateral aid, development funding and the construction of key infrastructure projects, and so on.

**Building (and broadcasting) the Belt and Road**

Given that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is very firmly something that Xi has associated himself with, it not surprisingly crops up throughout this special issue (even though this too had precedents from before Xi’s assumption of power). The Belt and Road is where the relationship between economic statecraft and the provision of transnational public goods comes under the spotlight. China is not the first country ever to use the provision of the latter (public goods) as a tool of the former (economic statecraft) to attain higher goals (e.g. geopolitical objectives). But at times, when reading the wider literature on the Belt and Road (i.e. beyond the papers in this collection) it seems as if it can only be seen as one or the other; either the benign provision of things to help others or the Machiavellian use of financial resources to help itself. Mullins and Zhao, for example, point to the significant differences between narratives of the Belt and Road in China, and the way that the Belt and Road story is told outside China (with in turn different narratives in individual BRI countries and also in ‘western’ non-participant states). There is, to say the least, significant slippage between what the story is meant to communicate when it is disseminated from China, and how it is understood when it arrives in different destinations.

These differences, in part, derive from a fundamental lack of trust in some quarters over Chinese objectives; no matter what was done or how it was done, the fact that it was being done by China means that it would be met with suspicion (echoing observations in the wider literature, for example, Pan, 2004; Turner, 2013). Or put another way, pre-existing perceptions of the messenger filter the way that the message is understood. This is perhaps one reason why it is often difficult to reconcile what we might call inside and outside stories of China’s rise and find common ground within them. While this has long been important, its significance has increased because the way that China has communicated its goals and tried to explain itself to the world has changed too. To be sure, the new communication strategy might owe much to previous desires to shape the way that China was perceived and understood by outsiders, but its style and intensity – and some of the targets of it too – have moved on from previous eras.

While the Belt and Road contains within it many real-world material projects, it is also a core component of this changed communication strategy. China could have done pretty much all that it has done under the banner of building the BRI without ever mentioning the initiative at all. It could have supported its companies to go overseas to invest and build things in much the same way that it had been doing before the initiative was announced; and indeed, in the same way that special help is provided to invest and build and buy things in those parts of the world that have not become part of either the Belt or the Road. And as the BRI has expanded to include over 60% of the world’s population with different emphases and micro-strategies in different parts of it, the idea of it being a single unified initiative or project becomes ever more stretched.

So why bother? Particularly as Xi and his advisors must have known that making such a splash would generate at least some negative responses and raise the prospect of China
having reached the point where it was now able and willing to try and change the world. Maybe they were surprised by some of the pushback that they got. There certainly seems to have been a Chinese response to some of the negative regional ‘pushback’ against some of the things said and done in the name of the BRI; a rolling back of some of the language that made it sound like a process of China doing things to others, and a new emphasis on collaboration and cooperation instead (and indeed, a reduction in investment as well). In the same vein, Cao (2017: 4203) suggests that the much touted ‘Community of Common Destiny’ (renlei minyun gongtongti) became a ‘Community of Shared Future for Mankind’ (or humankind) in its preferred English translation because the previous version implied that it was China that would be shaping the destiny of others (rather than it being a future that could be collectively shaped).

Perhaps, the Belt and Road is an example of the search for prestige, status, and respect that China’s leaders seem to think that they and the country have largely not been granted (Deng, 2008; Shambaugh, 2015). And not just China’s leaders either as even a rather quick survey of China’s online community’s discussion of how China is treated by ‘the west’ quickly shows. Here, we should note the connection between domestic politics and China’s changed global role. The fact that it is the Communist Party – and this particular incarnation of it – that has all but completed the long-desired task of national rejuvenation by restoring China to its rightful place at the top table of global politics is one more reason why the Chinese people should continue to support it (Edney, 2015).

Presumably, though, Xi and his advisors thought that the benefits of clearly articulating Chinese views, preferences, goals, and strategies were worth any potential costs. That those who want to impose those costs, for example, are now much less able to do anything that would really harm Chinese interests than they could in the past. Equally presumably, they did indeed feel that the time was now ripe for them to promote their preferences and outline things that they knew would not always be palatable in the West. Certainly, in the field of human rights discussed in this collection by Chen and Hsu, there has been no hesitancy in promoting a set of understandings and values that are at odds with previously dominant liberal principles. And to promote them as not just a set of principles for China, but potentially for others too. And to promote other Chinese normative preferences as the potential basis for future global governance forms in some issue areas as well.

Returning to the Belt and Road once more, it also acts as a vehicle for establishing Chinese preferences for how development should be done. More than this, it has within its DNA a rather different understanding of how development should be defined and, as a result, how developmental success should be evaluated. It is a definition and understanding that privileges a certain type of socio-economic advancement and is considerably less concerned with the sort of ‘good governance’ agendas favoured by other global governance actors or conceptions of development that focus on individual freedoms.

New era, new thinking

More than this, under Xi, we have seen the establishment of a new set of concepts and understandings of how international relations can and should be conducted, and the type of world order that practicing this new type of international relations should lead to. Once more, this is not entirely new as previous leaders had also established or associated themselves with new concepts that pointed to alternative ways of thinking about the world. Hu Jintao’s promotion of ‘the “Harmonious World” theory framework’ is a good example here (Su, 2009: 54). And as Xi himself has noted, his understanding of international
relations is not only influenced by a rather long standing Chinese emphasis on the sovereignty principle, but that this in itself is predicated on the guiding principles of international relations ‘established in the Peace of Westphalia over 360 years ago’ (Xi, 2017b).

But again, once more, we have seen a different tone, pace, and scale under Xi. The sheer amount that Xi has said about these new concepts is enough in itself to represent a key difference. It is certainly treated as being on a different level in China itself. In June 2018, at the Foreign Affairs Work Conference what was called ‘Xi Jinping Thought on diplomacy of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era’ was established as a new fundamental guideline for Chinese international interactions. While it might just sound a matter of semantics, the fact that it is labelled as ‘Thought’ elevates it above other previous types of thinking and innovation, and also means that its adoption as a guiding principle signals the start of a new era for Chinese foreign policy (Yang, 2018).

Moreover, as Foot and King argue in their contribution, ‘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’. This is why they think that it is important to try and really understand what China’s self-proclaimed world view actually is. We agree. Doing so, helps us to not only have a better chance of predicting future Chinese foreign policy behaviour, but can then lead to identifying which other global actors are likely to share at least some of these Chinese views (and which are most likely to oppose them).

**Xi induced change and Chinese international actors**

The final reason that we are inclined to answer John’s question in the affirmative is because, as outlined by Cabestan, Xi has overseen a restructuring of the policy making process to give himself greater authority and a greater ability to shape the nature of China’s international relations. He is widely credited within China as having established both an institutional mechanism and also a mode of thinking that combines domestic and foreign policy making processes (and concerns) into a single coherent framework. This, so the argument goes, allows China to pursue a multidimensional global strategy in ways that the previously more fragmented structures and methods simply could not generate (and indeed, were not constructed to generate in the first place). And as Karl Yan shows in his contribution, institutional reforms at different levels have also allowed for greater centralised control and coordination in some specific issue areas as well; in his case study, the internationalisation of Chinese high-speed train technology and railway construction. However, while recognising the importance of these changes, it is important to insert a word of caution too.

China’s international interactions can be characterised by what one of us has termed ‘bounded pluralism’ and ‘bounded autonomy’ (Breslin, 2021). The former refers to a degree of diversity in Chinese debates over China’s place in the world that might surprise the casual observer. On one level, while there are limits on what can be said and promoted (including some taboo areas and red lines that cannot be crossed), this still leaves considerable room for debate, discussion, and disagreement within the remaining boundaries of the permissible. On another level, even when top leaders announce new initiatives or concepts, there is still room for them to be debated and interpreted in different ways. Indeed, we might suggest that such announcements encourage and incentivise subsequent processes of modification and reinterpretation. It makes a lot of sense to try and explain how what you do fits into, or is an example of, new narratives, thinking, and concepts. It makes even more sense to try and explain why what you are doing should thus benefit from any material support that is going around to support the new priority.
Which leads us directly to bounded autonomy. This refers to the way that the state sets overarching objectives, and then introduces a range of supporting mechanisms to encourage others to buy-in to them, and to facilitate their participation. But it is up to others to then actually develop the specific international interactions that the leadership hopes will deliver its goals in the long term. As with bounded pluralism, this creates an incentive for a range of actors to try and utilise these supportive mechanisms to pursue their own narrower objectives – typically commercial and profit-making ones – by redefining what they do as fitting into this overarching state project. As long as this action does not actually undermine the attainment of the bigger project, then such autonomous action is tolerated and, in some cases, actively encouraged.

The state, however, retains the ability to step in and act if these quasi-autonomous actions and intentions create problems. The introduction of new controls on outward investment in 2016 and 2017 is a good example here. After a couple of years of almost uncontrolled outward investment growth, the state intervened to restrict the overseas sectors that Chinese investors could invest in, and encouraged them to align their commercial objectives with national strategic goals. And the whole point of making the changes that Yan outlines in the railway sector was to respond to what he calls the previous ‘cutthroat competition’ between different Chinese companies operating in overseas markets.

Thus, autonomy is bounded at both ends of the process (as it were); through the creation of overarching objectives at the top, and through the state’s ability and willingness to remove the ability to act at the bottom. But that still leaves a lot of room for a variety of different Chinese international actors to engage in a variety of international interactions within these boundaries. This means that we need to exercise care when trying to find evidence of intent. The Xi-changes that we have identified in this collection do not mean that everything that is done by Chinese international actors is at the direct behest of the central leadership specifically designed to attain state goals (or party ones). They might be doing what they are doing because the state has made it easier for them to do it, but that is not the same thing as acting under direct control and order. So what they do cannot simply (or always) be taken as evidence of direct state involvement, control, and intent.

For example, a number of projects along the Belt and Road have resulted in the host country being unable to pay back what they owe to their Chinese partner. For those who see these actions as evidence of state intent informed by a clearly thought out strategy, then one conclusion is that China is deliberately deploying a ‘debt trap diplomacy’ strategy. The whole point, from this logic, is to get these partners indebted to China so that the Chinese state can wring other concessions out of them that they would not have been able to get through other means. The way that China (or more correctly, China Merchant Ports) gained control of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is the example that is most often used to ‘prove’ this hypothesis (Chellaney, 2017). In reality, though, it is pretty much impossible to find evidence of projects where the Chinese side has deliberately set out to fund a project that is doomed to fail and thus enhance their bargaining power. Where the former perspective sees strategy and intent, an investigation into the specifics of failing cases tends to find exuberance, opportunism, and bad planning as the source of problems instead (Brautigam, 2020).

So we finish with a note of caution. Xi may indeed have a plan for how China might change the world to better suit its interests and reflect its preferences. And he might be more powerful than a number of his predecessors when it comes to putting plans into action. But Cabestan is careful to point out that greater consolidation of power is not the same thing as total control. And greater control and coordination in some sectors is not the same as total control and coordination in all of them. As such, while our overall conclusion
is that yes there really has been a Xi change, this does not mean that Xi or the Chinese leadership in general controls everything that is done by Chinese overseas on a day to day basis. To assume that his (or the state’s) hand is directly guiding every action can lead to rather serious miscalculations of who is doing what for which reasons. Life (and scholarship) would in many ways be easier if we just had to focus on the ideas and intentions of one person to understand a country’s international relations. But if the real dynamics of international interactions are more complicated than that, then it is incumbent on scholarship to reflect this complication, diversity messiness as well.

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Notes
1. This included encouraging us to have two workshops as part of the process, one at the Toronto ISA and one at Fudan University (both in 2019). The original plan was for John to be discussant on all of the papers, but in the end this was not possible. We would like to thank Greg Moore, Jack Snyder and Oliver Turner for stepping in to perform the discussant role in John’s place.
2. From 1979 to 1992 inclusive, if the start of the reform period is dated as the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 (as it usually is).
3. This became the 17 + 1 with the addition of Greece in 2019. Twelve of the 17 are EU members and the other five are candidate countries. With the exception of Greece, they were all either formerly Communist Party States, or constituent parts of larger ones.
4. It would seem less than coincidental that the European Union and the United States did not acknowledge China’s market economy status in the World Trade Organization the following year (as most people assumed would automatically occur after 15 years at the time of China’s entry in 2001).
5. In the 2019 ‘EU-China – A strategic Outlook’ (European Commission, 2019).
6. And indeed, he vetoed a further attempt at a pun in the title and the idea of gaige counting reforms under Xi (with gaige the Chinese for reform).
7. For a critical analysis of ‘revisionist’ challenges that rising powers like China are often said to pose for international order, especially compared to ‘status quo’ established powers, see Turner and Nymalm (2019).
8. Previous leaders had also been keen on establishing new linkages through and with Central Asian countries, and many of the specific projects associated with the Belt and Road preceded it too. Chinese involvement in the high-profile Gwadar Port project in Pakistan, for example, had been ongoing for a decade before the announcement of the Belt and Road, and being subsumed within it (Blanchard, 2019: 84).
9. Outlining and understanding the nature and extent of these debates was the subject of a parallel project alongside this one, resulting in a special issue of The Pacific Review (Breslin and Ren, 2020).

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