

The Inertia of Tradition in the Era of Modernization: The Influence of Sinocentrism on Chinese Foreign Policy (From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping)

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Abstract

The present study analyzes the influence of Sinocentrism, understood as a resilient civilizational self perception and cognitive matrix, on the evolution of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China from the reforms of Deng Xiaoping to the rule of Xi Jinping. Drawing on the social constructivist paradigm, the paper approaches China not as a classical Westphalian nation-state, but as a “civilization-state, whose international behavior is shaped by a sense of historical centrality, the collective trauma of the “Century of Humiliation,” and the aspiration to restore historical justice.

The central finding of the study is the operationalization of Sinocentrism through three analytical dimensions: epistemic superiority, normative autonomy, and institutional alternatives. These dimensions are used to assess the transformation of China's foreign policy doctrines across different historical periods:

During the era of Deng Xiaoping, Sinocentrism was transformed into “strategic restraint” and the preservation of national autonomy.

During the periods of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, it manifested itself through integration into global institutions, particularly the WTO, and the development of regional asymmetries through frameworks such as ASEAN and the SCO.

Under Xi Jinping, Sinocentrism acquired a more explicit normative and discursive character through the concept of “national rejuvenation” and global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The study concludes that contemporary Chinese foreign policy does not represent merely an adaptation to the international system, but rather constitutes a continuation of a long-term historical process in which Beijing seeks to synthesize its historical self perception with its growing capabilities in order to establish elements of a centralized and alternative international order.

Keywords: Sinocentrism, Chinese foreign policy, civilization-state, Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping, constructivism, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the People's Republic of China has emerged as one of the most important actors in the international system. The country's economic rise, growing diplomatic activity, and global scale initiatives have significantly increased interest in the factors that shape and determine the formation and development of Chinese foreign policy. Contemporary international processes demonstrate that explaining China's foreign behavior solely through its economic capabilities and the distribution of power is no longer sufficient, as the state's international actions are often rooted in a longer historical experience and distinctive forms of political self perception (Forsby, 2011). The significance of this issue is further reinforced by the fact that Chinese political discourse actively draws upon historical narratives and the country's centuries-long experience when justifying contemporary foreign policy. The memory of the „Century of Humiliation,” the idea of state continuity, and the perception of China's distinctive historical role holds an important place both in official rhetoric and in practical foreign policy decision making. As Zheng Wang notes, historical memory for contemporary China is not merely an interpretation of the past, but also functions as a political resource that influences the state's foreign policy priorities and international behavior (Zheng, 2012). Although contemporary literature extensively examines China's economic rise and its impact on the international system, comparatively less attention has been shown to how China's historical self perception and transformations in its identity have shaped the evolution of its foreign policy from the period of Deng Xiaoping's reforms to the rule of Xi Jinping. Examining this issue makes it possible to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the logic underlying China's international behavior and to assess the factors shaping its foreign policy amid the country's growing international role (Forsby, 2011) (jacques, 2009).

The analysis of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China and the factors influencing it solely through material categories, such as the military balance or economic interests, is incomplete and often leads to superficial conclusions. In this context, it is more appropriate to focus on non-material factors that have a significant influence on the policy making process. The constructivist paradigm of international relations provides a framework according to which the behavior of states is primarily shaped by their socially constructed identities, cultural codes, and internal perceptions (Wendt, 1992). In China's case, foreign policy activity is not merely a rational pursuit of security, economic modernization, or military power, but also an attempt to realize its own identity and restore the historical role that the country has been deprived of for centuries. China, in essence, does not represent a classical Western nation-state, whose behavior can be explained solely through the rules of the Westphalian system. As Lucian Pye famously formulated, China is “a civilization pretending to be a nation-state” (Pye, 1990, გვ. 58). As a “civilization-state,” China possesses a deeply rooted Sinocentric self-perception, an identity that positions it as the center of the world, the “Middle Kingdom” (*Zhongguo*). For centuries, this strategic culture shaped a normative order in which the outside world was perceived not as a community of equal partners, but as a cultural and political periphery (Johnston, 1995). From a constructivist perspective, however, China's contemporary identity is characterized by a dual nature: it is situated between a perception of historical

greatness and a profound psychological trauma. The “Century of Humiliation” (*Bainian Guochi*, 百年国耻) of the 19th and 20th centuries, during which China was subjected to territorial encroachment and political domination by Western imperial powers and Japan, brought about a profound transformation in Chinese collective consciousness (Wang, 2012). For a civilization possessing a Sinocentric identity, this was not merely a geopolitical defeat, but an ontological catastrophe, the disruption of what was perceived as the natural order of the world (Callahan, 2004). The trauma was so profound that it destabilized an imperial system with thousands of years of history and contributed to the emergence of the republic. Accordingly, contemporary Beijing’s foreign policy and its aspiration for global leadership, which Xi Jinping describes as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua Minzu Weida Fuxing*, 中华民族伟大复兴) can be understood as an attempt to compensate for this historical trauma. China operates under the perception that its current rise in the international system does not represent the acquisition of a new status, but rather the restoration of historical justice and the return to its natural and central position. To a certain extent, Beijing remains “captive” to its own narratives and Sinocentric identity, which suggest that China can never be merely one of several great powers on the international stage, rather, it must serve as the normative and civilizational axis of the system.

Taking background in to consideration, the aim of this article is to analyze the influence of Sinocentrism on the evolution of Chinese foreign policy from the period of Deng Xiaoping to the rule of Xi Jinping and to demonstrate how it was transformed and manifested itself in the foreign-policy doctrines and practices of different leaders.

This objective gives rise to the following main research questions:

1. **How was Sinocentrism reflected in Deng Xiaoping’s concept of “strategic restraint”?**
2. **In what forms did it manifest itself through institutional integration and regional asymmetries during the periods of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao?**
3. **Through what mechanisms did it acquire an explicit normative and institutional form under Xi Jinping through the concept of “national rejuvenation” and global initiatives?**

To answer these questions, the article reviews the theoretical foundations of Sinocentrism and analyzes its manifestations across different historical stages of Chinese foreign policy: the periods of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. The study is based on the social constructivist paradigm and employs historical-comparative analysis, discourse analysis, and causal process tracing (*Process Tracing*). Sinocentrism is operationalized as an analytical framework through three dimensions epistemic superiority, normative autonomy, and institutional alternatives, which are used to assess Chinese foreign policy doctrines and practices from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping.

The study proceeds from the assumption that, despite transformations in its forms of expression, Sinocentrism remained one of the important identity-based foundations of Chinese foreign policy from the period of Deng Xiaoping to the rule of Xi Jinping, manifesting itself in different forms under different leaders in accordance with the prevailing political and international environment.

Conceptualization of Sinocentrism Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

1. Conceptualization of Sinocentrism: Theoretical and Analytical Framework

In scholarly discussions of the phenomenon of Sinocentrism, it is essential to establish a conceptualization of the term in order to avoid politicized or otherwise reductive interpretations and to facilitate its operationalization throughout the research process. For the purposes of this study, Sinocentrism is defined not as an official ideological doctrine pragmatically employed by Beijing, but as an analytical category describing a resilient, long term civilizational self perception and cognitive matrix. According to this sociocultural self perception, China occupies the structural, moral, and historical center of a legitimate international order and is not merely one sovereign state among equals within a Westphalian, egalitarian system. This approach should not be equated with classical Western imperialism or crude geopolitical hegemonism. Rather, it is based on the fundamental assumption that the status of external actors, international legitimacy, and even the degree of development or modernization are properly assessed and validated in relation to Chinese civilizational standards. Understood in this way, Sinocentrism functions as a resilient cultural disposition, a form of social predisposition that has taken different institutional forms across different historical periods, ranging from the traditional imperial tributary system (中华朝贡体系) to the contemporary state discourse of “national rejuvenation” (中华民族伟大复兴). Drawing upon a rich civilizational and intellectual tradition, the contemporary Chinese state has gradually sought to offer the international community its own alternative model of modernization and development. This process is aimed not at mechanically copying the Western system, but at achieving international recognition and epistemic legitimation of a development paradigm characterized by Chinese particularity on the global stage.

Historical Perspective: From Cosmological Order to an Analytical Model

From a historical perspective, Sinocentrism was constructed around a cluster of interconnected ideas and symbols:

1. **“Zhongguo” (中国):** The „Middle Kingdom,” a concept that denoted not only a geographic center but also a cultural center.
2. **“Tianming” (天命):** The „Mandate of Heaven,” which granted the ruler moral legitimacy.
3. **Binary opposition:** A strict civilizational distinction between *Wenming* (文明, „civilized”) and the external „barbarians” (*Yi/Man/Rong/Di*), with the latter understood as subjects of cultural assimilation.

Within this context, the concept of „*Tianxia*” (天下, „all under heaven”) is frequently reintroduced into contemporary discourse. For the sake of academic precision, however, it is important to note that *Tianxia* is primarily a philosophical concept and a later academic reconstruction, revitalized most influentially by philosopher Zhao Tingyang’s work in 2005, rather than a term that the imperial or contemporary Chinese state has ever officially employed as a normative foreign-policy doctrine (Zhao, 2006).

In Western Sinology, John King Fairbank and his followers employed Sinocentrism as an analytical lens through which to describe the traditional East Asian order (Fairbank, 1968). According to the Fairbankian model, this order was highly hierarchical and non-egalitarian, with status calibrated according to cultural and geographic proximity to the center, the imperial core. Its underlying premise was the axiomatic assumption of Chinese moral and cultural superiority. Accordingly, Sinocentrism constitutes a scholarly interpretive framework for analyzing historical practices rather than a political slogan that Beijing has ever explicitly declared as an official doctrine.

3. The Contemporary Era: The Civilization-State and Foreign-Policy Narratives

The dramatic interruption of China's historical centrality during the twentieth century is portrayed in the official historiography of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) not as an evolutionary inevitability, but as a historical anomaly, the "Century of Humiliation" (百年国耻, 1839–1949) (Wang, 2012). Overcoming this cognitive trauma is precisely what Xi Jinping's declared projects of the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦) and „Great National Rejuvenation" (伟大复兴) seek to accomplish. Unlike the philosophical abstraction of *Tianxia*, the latter represents an active and politically binding state doctrine.

The concept of the „civilization-state," developed prominently by Martin Jacques, provides a theoretical explanation of the cultural dimension of this phenomenon (Jacques, 2009). Jacques argues that China's sense of cultural continuity, uniqueness, and structural centrality significantly predates the European model of the modern nation-state. The geopolitical weakness experienced during the 19th and 20th centuries temporarily suppressed this perception but failed to fully deconstruct it.

In contemporary foreign-policy discourse, this resilient civilizational self-perception re-emerges in official formulations such as the **"Community with a Shared Future for Mankind"**. An important conceptual distinction can be made between its internal and external representations (Callahan, 2016):

- **On international platforms (e.g. the United Nations):** The concept is positioned as an inclusive, multilateral, and universally applicable principle consistent with broadly shared liberal norms.
- **Within domestic party discourse:** Xi Jinping has directly connected the concept to traditional Sinocentric aspirations of "universal harmony" and the idea of "all under heaven as one family" (*Tianxia Yijia* — 天下一家). At forums organized by the Chinese Communist Party, the project is presented as a phenomenon derived specifically from Chinese civilizational wisdom, offering an alternative, Beijing-centered form of stability in response to global disorder.

4. Operationalization Framework for the Study

To measure and operationalize Sinocentrism in this study, the phenomenon is divided into three principal dimensions. The following framework summarizes the relevant indicators:

Analytical Dimension	Operationalization Indicators and Manifestations
1.Epistemic Superiority	Narratives emphasizing the uniqueness of the Chinese development model (e.g. “Chinese modernization”) and its perceived advantages compared with the Western model.
2. Normative Autonomy	Rejection of Western universalism (human rights, liberal democracy) and the international legitimation of China’s own value standards.
3. Institutional Alternatives	The reinvention of traditional moral and structural leadership through new global initiatives (e.g. BRI - Belt and Road Initiative, GDI - Global Development Initiative, GSI - Global Security Initiative).

Main Part

During the era of reform and opening up, the formation of China’s foreign policy took place under conditions in which economic development and integration into the international system gradually became important foundations of foreign policy. The initiation of reforms contributed to the expansion of China’s economic capabilities and to the country’s increasingly active participation in international relations. Alongside this process, China gradually transitioned from a relatively isolated state into an active participant in the international system (Zhang, 2010). The expansion of China’s engagement with the international system became particularly evident at the institutional level. China’s participation in international organizations and multilateral agreements increased, making its interaction with international institutions more active. During the reform and opening up period, China gradually adapted its domestic institutions to international regimes, norms, and standards(QIN, 2016). Alongside the growth of its economic capabilities, China’s regional and international engagement also expanded. Participation in regional cooperation frameworks became particularly important, including the deepening of relations with ASEAN. At the same time, the growth of Chinese diplomatic activity was reflected in its hosting of international and regional meetings and its more active use of multilateral formats (Zhang, 2010). During the same period, economic cooperation gradually extended beyond purely trade relations to include development assistance, infrastructure projects, and technical cooperation. This became particularly evident in China’s relations with developing countries, where economic cooperation emerged as one of the practical means through which China expanded its international influence (Park, 2015). Thus, during the reform and opening up period, the growth of China’s economic capabilities, the expansion of its engagement with international institutions, and the deepening of regional relations laid the foundations for the subsequent expansion of the country’s foreign policy. Through this process, China’s international role gradually increased, creating the conditions for emergence of more confident foreign policy at a later stage.

The Deng Xiaoping Period: Reforms and Opening Up policy, and the Transformation of Sinocentrism

To understand the transformation of Chinese foreign policy, it is essential to consider the historical context in which Deng Xiaoping's reforms emerged. During Mao Zedong's rule, foreign policy was largely determined by the logic of national security, the protection of sovereignty, and ideological competition. However, during the final years of Mao's leadership, particularly during the normalization of relations with the United States and growing tensions with the Soviet Union, signs of a more pragmatic approach had already begun to emerge in foreign policy. Nevertheless, economic backwardness and the consequences of the Cultural Revolution demonstrated that the existing model could no longer properly respond to the country's developmental needs, creating the necessity for a new foreign policy strategy (ZHANG, 1999). Under these conditions, Deng Xiaoping placed foreign policy at the service of economic modernization. Following the Third Plenum of 1978, the policy of reform and opening up identified economic strengthening as the country's primary development priority, while foreign policy was tasked with creating an international environment beneficial to this process. This vision was reflected in the concept of an **"independent foreign policy of peace,"** which was based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, state sovereignty, independence, and distancing from military political blocs. Deng's strategic thinking was centered on the idea of "peace and development," which subsequently became the foundation of a new direction in Chinese foreign policy (Keith, 2018). Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy vision was first and foremost reflected in China's gradual integration into the international economic system. Within the framework of reform and opening up, foreign relations became directly connected to the country's domestic economic modernization. To achieve this objective, China actively sought to attract foreign investment, expand technological cooperation, and deepen economic ties with both developed and developing states. Thus, foreign policy was no longer merely an instrument of security and ideological competition, it became one of the principal mechanisms for facilitating economic development (ZHANG, 1999). Within this process, the political significance of Sinocentrism did not disappear entirely, although its form of expression changed. During the Deng period, China no longer sought to express its centrality through the direct restoration of the old imperial hierarchy. Instead, it became more closely associated with the ideas of national strengthening, political autonomy, and the independent determination of China's own path of development. Accordingly, the adoption of Western technology, capital, and expertise did not imply convergence with the Western political model. During the reform and opening up period, China's identity was transformed from that of a revolutionary state toward that of a state participating in the international community, while the preservation of its own identity and independent development path remained important (QIN, 2016). At the same time, the function of Party ideology also changed: its role in revolutionary mobilization declined, while it increasingly became oriented toward legitimizing modernization and development, reflected in the principle of **"seeking truth from facts."** Thus, during the Deng period, Sinocentrism primarily manifested itself at the political and identity levels through the preservation of national autonomy, an independent path of modernization, and the maintenance of China's political system. These elements subsequently provided the foundation for the expansion of China's international capabilities.

Alongside economic openness, China sought to preserve independence of its foreign policy. The Deng administration was developing relations with the United States, Japan, and Western Europe while

simultaneously working toward the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union. This multi-vector diplomacy reflected Beijing's desire to avoid becoming dependent on any particular major power and to conduct its foreign relations primarily in accordance with its national interests. Such an approach represented a practical expression of the **“independent foreign policy of peace.”** Following the **1989 Tiananmen events** and the threat of international isolation, the strategy of *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦 - **hide your strength and bide your time**) acquired particular importance in Deng's foreign policy. The essence of this approach was to analysis the international environment cautiously and avoidance of excessive displays of national capabilities, refrain from prematurely claiming a leadership role, and concentrate the country's primary efforts on domestic development. Accordingly, China did not seek to openly challenge the existing international order. Instead, it utilized the international environment to strengthen its economic and institutional capabilities, allowing it to act from a stronger position in the future (Keith, 2018).

Another important dimension of Deng's foreign policy was the attempt to address issues of territorial integrity through diplomatic means. During this period, the concept of **“one country, two systems”** was developed with the objective of restoring Chinese sovereignty while allowing different economic and legal systems to coexist within a single state. Although the approach was initially formulated in relation to the Taiwan issue, it subsequently became the basis for the return of Hong Kong and Macao to Chinese jurisdiction. As Ronald Keith notes, this policy demonstrated Deng's attempt to pursue national interests through diplomatic and political mechanisms rather than military confrontation (Keith, 2018). Overall, the foreign policy practices established during the Deng Xiaoping era created the strategic foundation upon which China's subsequent international rise was built. Economic integration, an independent foreign policy, and strategic restraint were not merely short-term tactics, these elements became a long-term political framework that subsequent leaders developed under changing international conditions. For this reason, during the periods of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Chinese foreign policy did not begin with the formulation of entirely new principles. Rather, it largely represented an expansion of the strategy established by Deng and its adaptation to China's growing national capabilities (Zhang, 2010).

The Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Period: China's International Integration and the Practical Manifestation of Sinocentrism

During the combined periods of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Sinocentrism became more readily observable in the practice of Chinese foreign policy than it had been during the Deng era, although it still did not take the form of an explicitly declared doctrine. At this stage, Sinocentrism functioned as a behavioral logic that shaped the structure of China's external relations rather than as an openly articulated project for a new world order. As China's economic and political capabilities grew, an understanding of the state that went beyond the conventional Westphalian model of the nation-state became increasingly evident. Instead, Chinese foreign-policy discourse increasingly reflected a self-perception of China as a **“civilization-state,”** grounded in millennia of historical continuity, cultural distinctiveness, and a conception of its own central position within the international system. As Martin Jacques argues, describing China solely through the category of the nation-state fails to capture the particularities of its historical and political development,

since China constitutes a civilization-state whose political behavior is significantly shaped by its historical legacy and civilizational self-consciousness (Jacques, 2009). Within this context, China increasingly perceived itself not merely as one state among others in the international system, but as a central actor whose economic, political, and historical weight had to be taken into account by other actors. China's growing international role became particularly visible in the transformation of its relationship with the global economic order. Its accession to the **World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001** was widely perceived in the West as a step that, alongside China's economic integration, would facilitate its gradual political liberalization and convergence with the Western model of development. However, this expectation was based on the assumption that economic modernization would automatically lead to the convergence of China's political system and identity with the Western model (Jacques, 2009).

In practice, China transformed its integration into the global economic system into an instrument of its own development strategy while maintaining central political control over economic processes and preventing Western political norms from being transferred into its domestic governance model. Thus, participation in international economic institutions did not amount to the passive acceptance of the existing order. On the contrary, China gradually sought to convert its growing economic capabilities into international influence and to assume a more active role within global institutions (Zhang, 2010). Consequently, external economic actors became increasingly integrated into China's economic space within an institutional and political framework largely defined by Beijing, contributing in practice to growing asymmetries in economic relations. This logic was clearly reflected in China's approach to the international economic order. Membership in the WTO did not imply the abandonment of a Sinocentric self-perception. Rather, China used participation in the global economic system to reinforce the centrality of its own economic space. International rules operated within the Chinese market, but their implementation and interpretation remained subject to strong central governmental control. Consequently, external economic actors were incorporated into the Chinese economic space within a structure substantially shaped by Beijing (Forsby, 2011).

The influence of this logic became even more visible in regional policy. China-ASEAN economic relations were formally based on sovereign equality, yet in practice they increasingly produced an asymmetrical pattern of relations in which access to the Chinese market and Chinese capital occupied a central position. In this context, Sinocentrism was not expressed through demands for direct political subordination, but through **economic gravitational power**, which encouraged neighboring states to adjust aspects of their foreign policies while taking Chinese interests into consideration (Lu, 2018).

We can also view the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in sphere of security as an example of how Sinocentric logic was transformed into a modern multilateral format. The organization was not based on the principle of a conventional military alliance, instead, security issues were approached in a manner that prioritized state sovereignty and regime stability. This corresponded with important elements of Chinese foreign policy culture and with a Sinocentric conception of order in which a central power contributes to stability while peripheral actors adapt to the broader framework. Such an approach was consistent with a conception of order based less on universally equal norms than on hierarchical responsibility and central

coordination (Qin, 2018). A continuation of this worldview can also be identified in questions of sovereignty inherited from the Deng period. China's position toward **Taiwan** remained uncompromising and largely non-negotiable under both Jiang and Hu. Despite the occasional moderation of diplomatic language, practical measures including: military exercises, political pressure, and efforts to maintain a strict interpretation of the issue in the international arena reflected the perceived primacy of central political authority. Such behavior can be interpreted as reflecting a Sinocentric understanding of territorial integrity and political legitimacy rather than being based exclusively on the logic of Westphalian sovereign equality.

Throughout this period, Chinese foreign policy behavior therefore increasingly revealed a transformed form of Sinocentrism. Centrality was no longer articulated through the explicit language of civilizational superiority, instead, it manifested itself in practice through economic asymmetries, the design of regional institutional frameworks, and uncompromising positions on questions of sovereignty. At the same time, China's successful economic modernization strengthened confidence in its own development model and increasingly enabled it to be presented as an effective alternative to the Western liberal model (Jacques, 2009). At this stage, therefore, Sinocentrism operated as an **implicit framework** shaping China's relationship with the external world and influencing the everyday practice of its foreign policy.

The Xi Jinping Era: The Reorganization of Sinocentrism and China's Global Ambition

With the departure of Hu Jintao from the presidency and the rise of Xi Jinping to power, a qualitative transformation took place in Chinese foreign policy that cannot be explained solely by the personal style of the leader. Rather, this change reflects a broader process in which China no longer perceives its international role as that of a restrained state or one that merely adapts to its external environment. The accumulation of economic, military and institutional resources has created conditions under which Chinese foreign policy increasingly seeks to actively shape the international landscape rather than merely respond to it (Jacques, 2009). At this stage, the discourse of foreign policy also underwent a noticeable transformation. Whereas in previous periods the rhetoric of caution and peaceful development was a central position, the Xi Jinping era placed greater emphasis on "national rejuvenation" and the status of China as a „great power" (Park, 2015). This linguistic transformation is not merely symbolic, it reflects China's growing willingness to present its interests as legitimate and indispensable elements of the international order. It is precisely within this context that Sinocentrism began to emerge more openly not as historical nostalgia, but as a framework for contemporary foreign policy. During the Xi Jinping era, Sinocentrism was no longer limited to a behavioral logic, it gradually acquired a discursive dimension as well. China increasingly presents its own experience and its model of development and governance as an alternative path to the Western liberal order. This does not necessarily imply a direct rejection of the international system, but it clearly indicates an attempt to transform it by shifting the existing centers of influence. As scholars have noted, China's strategic objective at this stage is no longer limited to integration into the system, but it increasingly involves gradual reshaping of its internal logic in accordance with Chinese interests (Friend, 2018).

During Xi's leadership, the question of status has also acquired key importance in foreign policy. China has become increasingly unwilling to accept a role assigned to it by other powers and has instead sought to

define its own position within the international hierarchy (Wong K.-H., 2018). the status based self perception is closely connected to Sinocentrism, as China increasingly sees itself not merely as a powerful state but as a historically central political entity whose influence should naturally be recognized by external actors. This transformation is also reflected in China's relations with international institutions. China is no longer satisfied with merely acting as a recipient of existing rules and increasingly seeks to influence the formation of the international agenda. At the same time, Beijing's objective is not the complete rejection of the existing international order. Rather, it pursues a policy of **selective revision**, maintaining those institutions and norms that serve its interests while seeking to modify or transform elements that it perceives as constraints on its growing status and international role. International norms continue to be utilized, but their interpretation and application frequently serve China's strategic objectives. This approach reflects the view that international order is not a static , but a changing structure in which central powers can transform norms through practice (Qin, 2018). During the Xi Jinping era, Sinocentrism became particularly evident in specific foreign policy initiatives that extended beyond discursive and theoretical frameworks into practical action. One of the most important examples is the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which is officially presented as a project aimed at promoting economic cooperation and connectivity. In practice, the initiative has created a broad infrastructure and financial network in which China functions as a central coordinator. Partner countries participate in this network according to different interests, but the structure of the network itself establishes the broader parameters within which cooperation takes place. Such relationships create a situation in which China is not merely one participant among others, but a central actor shaping the direction of the process. At the institutional level, a similar tendency can be observed in the way China uses both new and existing organizations to promote its vision. International institutions are no longer merely platforms for participation, they are increasingly becoming areas in which China seeks to influence the interpretation of rules and transform established practices. This does not necessarily constitute open confrontation with the existing order, but it demonstrates an attempt to develop, from within that order, mechanisms that more closely correspond to China's interests and self-perception (Friend, 2018).

This transformation is particularly visible in the regional environment, especially across Asia, where China's economic weight and political activism are gradually contributing to the emergence of new patterns of interaction. Neighboring states increasingly face a reality in which foreign policy planning is difficult without taking China's position into account. Although official rhetoric continues to emphasize equality and mutual benefit, decision making processes are becoming increasingly asymmetrical in practice. The change is even more apparent on questions of sovereignty. In relation to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea, China leaves increasingly limited space for ambiguous interpretations. Administrative measures, legal arguments, and elements of power projection are employed not merely as forms of temporary pressure, but as means of creating long term realities. This approach reflects the perception that questions concerning central political authority stand above external international debate and should not be subject to outside arbitration (Qin, 2018). China's role in relations with developing countries has also expanded considerably during this period. Economic cooperation, technology transfer, and infrastructure investment have gradually created networks of interdependence. These relationships

are further reinforced by references to a shared anti-imperialist past and by China's presentation of itself as an alternative to former colonial powers, particularly in Africa. This contributes to China's image as a stable and long-term partner (Park, 2015). Although explicit hierarchical demands are rarely expressed in these relationships, the structure of cooperation itself creates an environment in which China functions increasingly as a coordinator of processes rather than merely as one partner among others (Wong K.-H. , 2018).

At the same time, changes in the international environment played an important role in strengthening China's position, particularly the unstable dynamics of U.S. foreign policy during Donald Trump's first administration. At this stage, American foreign policy was characterized by frequent shifts in position, skepticism toward institutional frameworks, and distrust toward multilateral agreements, including arrangements involving strategic allies. Such behavior weakened the perception of the United States as a predictable leader and created uncertainty among both allies and competitors. For China, this situation was not perceived merely as a temporary diplomatic fluctuation, but as a structural opportunity to strengthen its position within the international system. The Trump administration's distancing from multilateral frameworks, including its negative approach toward certain international trade and climate agreements, contributed to the perception of a vacuum in global governance. China gradually sought to fill aspects of this vacuum through active diplomatic engagement and the promotion of its own initiatives. Although Beijing rarely presented itself explicitly as the defender of the liberal order, in practice it increasingly positioned itself as an actor supporting stability and continuity, thereby strengthening its international weight at a time when American diplomacy was increasingly perceived as inconsistent (Friend, 2018).

The instability of U.S. policy also had a dual effect in the context of the trade war. On the one hand, tariffs and economic pressure intensified China–U.S. tensions. On the other hand, the confrontation accelerated China's efforts toward economic diversification, the deepening of regional partnerships, and the strengthening of alternative institutional mechanisms. As a result, China's foreign economic policy became even more closely connected to a long-term strategy aimed at reducing dependence on any single global center. According to the figures, this transformation is reflected in the changing distribution of countries' major trading partners: whereas in 2000 China was the largest trading partner of only 33 countries, compared with 163 for the United States, by 2025 China had become the largest trading partner of approximately 145 countries, or nearly two-thirds of the countries in the world (Cohen, 2026). The shift in American diplomatic tone also affected China's ability to present its foreign policy as rational and predictable. This is consistent with a 2025 Gallup study, according to which international approval of U.S. leadership declined significantly, particularly during the Trump administrations and among NATO member states (Julie Ray, 2026) . Whereas Washington frequently relied on unilateral decisions and short-term calculations under Trump, Beijing emphasized consistency, gradualism, and historical responsibility. This contrast became particularly visible to international audiences and contributed to China's image as a power operating according to a long-term vision rather than situational impulses (Qin, 2018). In this context, Sinocentrism became further consolidated during the Xi Jinping era as a framework for Chinese foreign policy. American instability did not merely create a tactical advantage for China, it also

strengthened the argument that the international order should not depend on a single center and requires an alternative configuration of global powers. In this process, China increasingly presented itself not as a destroyer of the existing order, but as a power that naturally occupies a central position within global political and economic networks, particularly under conditions in which the traditional leading power is perceived as inconsistent and lacking predictability (Zhang, 2019).

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the evolution of Chinese foreign policy cannot be adequately understood only by the balance of power, economic interests, or the individual decisions of political leaders. China's international behavior has historically been grounded in a particular self perception that views the state not merely as one actor among others in the international system, but as a central political and cultural entity. In this context, Sinocentrism does not constitute a static or monolithic ideology, rather, it represents a dynamic and adaptable logic that has taken different forms across historical periods and has been incorporated into various institutional and discursive frameworks. The hierarchical world order of imperial China and the concept of *Tianxia* created a conception of international relations that was not based on sovereign equality, but rather on the relationship between a center and its periphery. Although this system eventually disintegrated, its fundamental intellectual and cultural logic did not disappear entirely. During the republican period and subsequently under Mao Zedong, Sinocentrism was transformed through a new ideological vocabulary. Nevertheless, China's behavior continued to reflect the logic of an independent center that remained skeptical toward orders imposed by external powers. During the Deng Xiaoping period, Chinese foreign policy entered a phase of pragmatism and strategic restraint, but this transformation did not signify the abandonment of Sinocentrism. Rather, it represented its adaptation to the new conditions of the international environment. During the eras of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, this approach became further developed through institutional integration, economic centralization, and regional asymmetries, gradually strengthening China's position as an indispensable actor in global and regional processes.

With Xi Jinping's rise to power, Sinocentrism began to acquire more visible and explicit forms. Chinese foreign policy was no longer limited to adapting to the external environment and increasingly sought to actively shape the international order. The discourse of "national rejuvenation," global and regional initiatives, the creation of alternative institutions, and firm positions on issues of sovereignty reflect a worldview according to which China perceives its centrality as both historically justified and structurally inevitable. In this process, the logic of *Tianxia* does not appear as a direct or formally declared doctrine, however, it can be clearly identified in contemporary practices of order-building, central coordination, and hierarchical relations. At the same time, changes in the international environment, particularly the perceived inconsistency of U.S. foreign policy, have created conditions under which elements of the alternative order promoted by China may become more attractive to various international actors. This does not imply the complete dismantling of the existing international system, but rather indicates a transformation in the configuration of power, in which China increasingly seeks to synthesize its historical

self perception with its contemporary capabilities. Ultimately, analyzing Chinese foreign policy through the conceptual framework of Sinocentrism allows us to better understand not only specific examples of China's international behavior, but also the deeper logic connecting these behaviors across different historical periods. Under Xi Jinping, this logic has increasingly acquired a normative dimension through concepts such as *Tianxia*, which conceptualizes international order not as a mechanical aggregation of equal sovereign states, but as an interconnected space in which order, stability, and coordination are organized around a central power. Thus, the transformation of China's international role should not be understood as an accidental deviation or a temporary shift in foreign policy orientation, but rather as the continuation of a long-term historical process that has acquired new, more active, and more systemic forms under contemporary conditions.

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