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China debating the regional order

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China's academic debates on the regional order in Asia since 2012, by surveying nine thematic issues. Those thematic issues are not exhaustive, yet they provide an overview of China's intellectual landscape on the key issue of the regional order in Asia. This study shows that the United States (US) might have exaggerated China's strategic intention. Rather than aiming to replace US hegemony with a Chinese-led *Tianxia*/tributary system in the region, Chinese scholars advocate mutual accommodation between China and the US.

KEYWORDS Alliance; China; Indo-Pacific strategy; regional order; the United States

The miraculous rise of China in the past few decades has greatly shaped the regional order in Asia. During this period, China's academia has advanced a variety of arguments regarding China's strategic thinking and objectives on the regional order. As the views of these intellectual elites will, to a varying degree, inform and influence China's policy choices in the future, it is therefore of importance to understand how Chinese scholars approach and debate the issue of the regional order, so as to help shed light on the future trajectory of the regional order in Asia. Since Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CC-PCP) in 2012, the new leadership has brought changes to China's foreign policies while keeping some policies consistent with those of previous leaders.

This article will survey China's academic debates from 2012 onward on the Asian regional order, made by mainstream Chinese scholars of

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international relations (IR). These debates consist of the following nine thematic issues: (1) whether or not China should build an alliance with Russia; (2) whether or not China should provide a security guarantee to neighboring countries; (3) the debate regarding how to 'break' or 'dismantle' the US alliance system in the region; (4) discussion centering on the New Asian Security Concept and its implications for the regional order; (5) debate over the 'Indo-Pacific' strategy and counter-measures against it; (6) debate over the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the development of the BRICS countries; (7) debate regarding the role that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays in shaping the regional order; (8) debate on the regional order of Northeast Asia; and (9) debate over the 'Tribute system' and the '*Tianxia* order'. These thematic issues, reflecting the viewpoints of Chinese scholars on the regional order from varied perspectives, are not intended to be exhaustive. We believe, however, that by sampling these debates on some of the most important issues concerning the regional order, we should be able to gain an overview of China's intellectual landscape on the key issue of the regional order in Asia.

A China-Russia alliance?

Soon after the Obama administration came to power, Washington announced the 'pivot to Asia' strategy in 2009, which essentially led to the enhancement of the 'hub-and-spoke' system in Asia – wherein the US as a hub established bilateral security alliances with several Asian countries. Consequently, Chinese scholars' attention on the regional order shifted to focus on China's responses to the US-led alliance network. A heated exchange took place in Chinese scholarly and policy communities between 2012 and 2014. Some insisted on building a China-Russia alliance, whereas others were not strong advocates of such an alliance, but nevertheless supposed that the possibility of such an alliance should not be ruled out. Others suggested that China could maintain a 'quasi alliance' or 'weak alliance' with other countries in the region. Intriguingly, many Chinese scholars firmly opposed the idea of building a China-Russia alliance, although they provided markedly different rationales supporting their arguments.

Beijing has been continuously bolstering its bilateral ties with Moscow since the end of the Cold War. In 1996, Beijing and Moscow announced that the two countries shared a 'strategic partnership', while in 2011, China and Russia agreed to upgrade their relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. Taking his first state visit to Russia after assuming the Chinese presidency in 2013, Xi Jinping remarked that China and Russia enjoyed one of the world's most important bilateral relationships and the

best of major-country relationships (Xinhua, 2013). In 2014, the two countries issued a joint statement, declaring that their comprehensive strategic relationship had entered a 'new stage'. The upgrading of the China-Russia strategic partnership came at a time when conflict between China and Japan escalated due to territorial disputes over the Diaoyu Islands, and when Beijing was under increasing strategic pressure exerted by Washington's 'pivot to Asia' strategy. Clearly, China intended to send a message: Beijing had the option of strengthening relations with Russia to counter-balance the US strategic encirclement.

Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University, one of China's most prominent IR scholars, is among the strongest advocates of a China-Russia alliance. Since 2011, Yan has published a series of writings expounding upon his arguments. He believes that Beijing and Moscow share the same strategic and security interests at present because the structural conflicts between China and the US are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, while it is also hard to see an easing of tensions between Russia and the US. It is thus more beneficial for China to ally itself with Russia (Yan, 2012, pp. 21–25). Yan argues that an alliance with Russia could effectively alleviate security concerns faced on the northern and western borders of China and the strategic pressures placed on China by the US at the eastern and southern borders (Yan, 2013a, pp. 208–209).

Not every Chinese scholar endorses Yan's position. Indeed, there are scholars who have taken a more neutral stance on this issue. For instance, Feng Shaolei at East China Normal University, a leading Russia expert in China, has not endorsed an immediate China-Russia alliance but instead implies that there is 'no upper limit' for the China-Russia strategic partnership (Feng, 2016).

Besides, Sun Degang (Sun, 2011, pp. 70–79) from Shanghai International Studies University maintains that China could seek to develop a 'quasi alliance' with Russia. A strategy of establishing a 'quasi alliance' could bring more friends to China while at the same time avoiding the China-US relationship becoming more confrontational. Wang Dong of Peking University explains that China's strategic goal in Asia is not to 'push the US out of East Asia'. There is little chance for the emergence of a formal China-Russia alliance in the future unless the two countries are forced to pursue such a path due to increasing strategic and security pressures from the US. Before this happens, however, China and Russia may seek a hedging strategy instead of any rigid ones, so that they will encounter fewer strategic risks but enjoy more freedom of action (Wang, 2015, pp. 69–70).

Although a small number of Chinese scholars have argued that Beijing should ally with Moscow, the Chinese government nevertheless has not pursued such a policy option. Instead, Beijing has reiterated that in its nature, the China-Russia strategic partnership is 'non-aligned, non-confrontational, and not targeted at third parties' (People.com, 2014; Xinhua, 2014).

Moreover, even when the Crimean Crisis intensified in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly brushed aside the possibility of a political and military alliance between China and Russia (Beijing News, 2014). In fact, as early as when this issue began to stir up controversy in 2011, many Chinese scholars strongly opposed the idea of pursuing an alliance with Moscow. Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University argues that China and Russia have formed an alliance three times in history, but that each time the alliance was short-lived and China's security ended up being seriously damaged. Today, the public on both sides harbor doubts on the issue. Long gone are the old days when China and Russia maintained a fraternal relationship in the 1950s. Moreover, the Russians are wary of becoming a 'junior partner' of China, and are keen to avoid being dragged into the confrontation between China and the US. Finally, the economic ties between the two countries are not as close as they were in the 1950s. Russia is worried that an excessive economic bond will make itself a 'vassal' of China (Zhao, 2013, pp. 66–71).

At present, the strategic pressure exerted by the US on China and Russia is still far from reaching the point where Beijing and Moscow believe that they must enter a formal alliance. 'Forging a partnership without forming an alliance' (*jieban bu jiemeng*) is considered by the two governments to be a strategic choice with lower costs but greater returns. Despite the fact that China-US relations have grown more tense amidst trade disputes in the past two years, Beijing and Moscow still appear to have no intention to forge a formal alliance. Nevertheless, there is still the possibility for China to form a tactical coalition with Russia over selective issues.

Should China provide security guarantee to neighboring countries?

Although only very few Chinese scholars advocate allying with Russia, a larger number consider that it is necessary for China to provide more security guarantees to neighboring countries, believing that it is not enough for China to just develop economic ties with its neighbors. Again, Yan Xuetong is among the strongest advocates for providing a security guarantee to China's neighbors. He argues that China has already become the second most powerful country in the world, and an increasing number of countries are asking China to assume greater international security responsibilities, or in other words, hope that China can provide them with a security guarantee. If China declines to do so, Yan warns that China might be considered by other countries to be an 'irresponsible' or even an 'immoral, unreliable' great power (Yan, 2013b, pp. 15–16; Yan, 2014, pp. 153–184).

Zhou Fangyin from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies makes the same argument using a slightly different rationale. Zhou contends (Zhou, 2013, pp. 20–24) that ensuring greater economic benefits for neighboring countries will hardly relieve their security concerns about China. Some US allies might mistakenly believe that China has given its neighbours economic benefits out of fear for their alliances with the US, so they will be more determined to ‘fall to the US side’ on security issues. Therefore, Zhou argues that pursuing economic policy alone cannot defuse the threat posed to China by the US-led alliances in the region.

However, except for the relatively close security cooperation with partners such as Pakistan, the Chinese government does not seem to have explicitly stated that it provides security protection for any other countries.

How to drive a wedge between the US and its allies?

Although most Chinese scholars agree that forming a military alliance with Russia is not in China’s interests, how to deal with the US alliance system in Asia is an issue that Chinese scholars cannot ignore. After Washington announced the pivot to Asia strategy, many Chinese scholars explored counter-measures to break the US strategic encirclement of China, drive a wedge between the US and its allies, and alleviate the strategic pressure on China from the US.

Liu Feng of Nankai University contends that there are two ways for China to ‘break’ or ‘dismantle’ American allies. Calling the first a ‘united front’ approach, Liu argues that China should seek to form coalitions with different countries centered on different political, economic or military issues, and should unite as many friends as possible. The second is to use economic leverage to change the incentives of US allies and partners – in other words, by continuing to deliver economic benefits to countries that are friendly to China, while imposing economic punishment upon trouble makers (Liu, 2012, pp. 64–67).

In addition, Zhong Zhenming of the Shanghai-based Tongji University (Zhong, 2012, pp. 80–84) suggests that China can employ a ‘wedge strategy’ to split the opponents. For weaker members within the US alliance system, strategic measures such as engagement, reassurances, negotiation, and even ‘moderate coercion’ when necessary, can be employed. This will help wean them off their relationship with the US and create a more favorable external environment for China’s rise. Gao Cheng at the National Institute of International Strategy (NISS) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) argues that China should adopt varying policies toward different neighboring countries. The amount of benefits China offers to various countries should be consistent with the degree of friendship between

these countries and China. The purpose of such an approach is to eliminate some neighboring countries' illusion of trying to pressure China for greater economic gains through strengthening security ties with the US. In particular, Gao argues that it is necessary to prevent some US allies or partners from attempting to take advantage of China's 'stability-first' (*weiwen*) mentality by creating troubles. China should continue to work hard to maintain the neutrality of those US allies without territorial disputes with China, and to avoid the formation of an offensive alliance surrounding China aimed at containing its long-term development (Gao, 2014, pp. 45–48).

Zhou Fangyin compared the effectiveness of 're-assurance' and 'pressuring'. In his view, even if China tries to re-assure an American ally, that state will likely not determine that US protection is no longer needed. This is because, facing a rising China, it is beneficial for them to obtain more security protection from the US. On the contrary, if China exerts security pressure on the US allies, they will soon realize that maintaining alliances with the US is not cost-free; rather, it may bring risks in the security sphere. Zhou adds a caveat that China should not impose excessive pressure; otherwise it will lead to unpredictable consequences and even strategic isolation (Zhou, 2013, pp. 20–22). By contrast, Qi Huaigao of Fudan University holds that, given the fairly large power gap between China and the US at present, China should not adopt a 'hard balancing' strategy toward the US, arguing that 'soft balancing' or 'institutional balancing' is the preferred strategy. Interestingly, Qi suggests that the multilateral cooperation advocated by China is compatible and should coexist with the US-led alliance system in the region (Qi, 2011, pp. 70–74).

Believing that the two determinant factors of the configuration of the future East Asian order are the continuation of the US alliance system in East Asia and the rise of China, Sun Xuefeng and Huang Yuxing of Tsinghua University argue that the key to determining the future of the regional order is how the existing US alliance system responds to a rising China. To consolidate and deepen what the two authors call 'the regional coordination and co-governance order', they believe it is also necessary for the US and its regional allies to make a 'good-will strategic response' to China's 'self-restraint policy' (Sun & Huang, 2011, pp. 30–34).

A number of scholars have taken note of the declining US capability in dominating the regional order. Wu Xinbo, a prominent US expert at Fudan University, holds that the US ability to shape the regional order has fallen dramatically. One case in point: the US has failed to dominate the East Asia Summit. Clearly, the US is no longer the preeminent hegemonic power that it was during the 1990s (Wu, 2013, pp. 66–67). However, another prominent IR scholar, Zhu Feng of Nanjing University, offers a different view. Predicting that in the foreseeable future, the US will remain in a 'proactive

and advantageous' position in the unfolding strategic competition between China and the US in the Asia-Pacific, Zhu advises against 'strategic adventurism' on the part of China, cautioning that any assertive actions by China may invite strong counter-measures from the US (Zhu, 2013, pp. 23–26).

There are also scholars who provide an analysis from the geopolitical perspective. Seeing the East Asian security order as based on a 'separated continental-maritime structure', Wei Zongyou of Fudan University argues that China and the US should, like what Beijing and Washington did in 1972, make concessions and reach a second 'strategic compromise'. China should recognize the legitimate interests and military presence of the US in the Western Pacific, while the US should acknowledge China's legitimate maritime interests in the coastal areas of East Asia and accept the peaceful transition of China from a 'land power' to a 'land-sea composite power'. China should pledge not to resolve territorial disputes by force and, in reciprocity, the US should commit itself to restraining unilateral provocations by some of its East Asian allies (Wei, 2014, pp. 54–56). Wei's logic is echoed by the influential view of 'co-evolution of two orders', put forward by Wang Jisi, one of China's most renowned US experts. The idea is that the US should respect and not actively challenge China's basic political system and domestic order. Only then can China be convinced that it should respect and not challenge the preeminent leading position enjoyed by the US and the existing international order advocated by Washington (Wang, 2014).

Both Zhou Fangyin (Zhou, 2013, p. 23) and Ling Shengli of Foreign Affairs University, a leading university affiliated with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (Ling, 2015, pp. 46–50) suggest that China, facing the US-led regional security alliance system in East Asia, should actively develop 'minilateral' cooperation in the region. Such an approach may provide greater security reassurance and help establish a more open and inclusive regional security mechanism. For example, promoting minilateral cooperation between China, the US and Japan; or China, the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK); or China, the US and Australia, may help alleviate the security concerns of these US allies toward China.

Interestingly, some Chinese scholars regard the ROK as a possible 'breakthrough' or 'breach' for China to dismantle the US alliance system. Huang Fengzhi and his co-author from Jilin University argue that China should strengthen military and economic cooperation with the ROK in order to reduce the latter's dependence upon the US. They contend that China could, when necessary, impose moderate economic sanctions and strategic punishment against the ROK to prevent it from continuing to bolster its ties with the US (Huang & Liu, 2013, pp. 33–34). Yan Xuetong took a step further by advocating an alliance between China and the ROK. If China succeeds in aligning itself with the ROK, Seoul, despite being an ally of the

US, will likely take a neutral standing on China-US competition rather than take the sides of the US or turn against China. Yan nevertheless concedes that an immediate military alliance between China and the ROK is unlikely (Yan, 2015, pp. 25–27). Cao Wei, Yang Yuan and Zhou Fangyin (Cao & Yang, 2015, pp. 85–87; Zhou & Wang, 2016, pp. 41–43) attempt to seek strategic implications for contemporary China by looking into international relations in ancient East Asia. Their studies show that there were times in ancient Asian history where a small power formed alliance relations with two competing great powers simultaneously; a particular strategic pattern they define as ‘two-sided allying’ (*liangmian jiemeng*). Specifically, they investigate the cases of two successive ancient kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, Goryeo (918–1392 AD) and Chosŏn (1392–1910 AD), with the former having had simultaneously formed alliances with both Liao and North Song – two competing continental great powers – and the latter with the two contending powers, the Ming Dynasty and the Manchurian Hou Jin. They conclude that the spheres of influence of two competing great powers are not necessarily clear-cut or zero-sum and there are possibilities that a small power can swear allegiance to two competing big powers at the same time; an interesting finding clearly at odds with conventional alliance theory. Their research seems to imply that despite the alliance between the ROK and the US, there still exists the possibility in which China can strengthen its relationship, if not forming an alliance with the ROK.

Discussion on the new Asian security concept

At the 4th Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit held in May 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a New Security Concept for Asia, calling for a common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security strategy in Asia. President Xi stated that ‘we need to innovate in our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a shared, win-win road for Asian security’. Opposing the Cold War and zero-sum mentality, Xi argued that ‘no country should attempt to dominate’ the region, advocating a ‘multi-pronged and holistic approach and enhance regional security governance in a coordinated way’. In particular, Xi stated that ‘in the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia’ (Xi, 2014).

Jiang Zhida of the China Institute of International Studies, a leading think tank affiliated with China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that the core values of the New Asian Security Concept are openness, inclusiveness and win-win cooperation; implying that all countries have an equal right to engage in regional security affairs and no country should seek to

monopolize regional security affairs (Jiang, 2014, pp. 1–11). Han Aiyong of the Institute for International Strategic Studies at the Central Party School, a prominent think tank affiliated with the CC-CPC, concurs that the new order advocated by China is characterized by openness, elasticity and flexibility rather than closedness and exclusiveness. Han acknowledges that the US has long had a strong presence in East Asia and that cooperation with the US and the US-led alliance system should be an important feature of any future security order in Asia (Han, 2015, pp. 63–64).

Xi's 'Asia for Asians' remarks have been criticized by some Western observers as proof that China is pursuing its own version of the 'Monroe Doctrine' (Navarro, 2014; Pei, 2014). Chinese scholars, however, do not share this view. Shen Dingli of Fudan University argues that the New Asian Security Concept advocates multilateral security and collective security in Asia, which provides a strong impetus for shaping an Asian cooperative security system. Shen believes that CICA should continue to draw lessons from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to evolve into a more substantive region-wide security architecture (Shen, 2014, pp. 1).

In an interview published by *South Reviews (Nan feng chuang)* – a leading Chinese news magazine that enjoys a large elite readership among the government, academia and business – Zhou Fangyin notes that there is a fundamental difference between China's proposal and the Monroe Doctrine, as President Xi never made the argument that Asian affairs should be run by China or any other big powers of Asia. The statement of President Xi is bold yet prudent, in fact bolder than that of the academia. The upgrading of the CICA mechanism would, to some extent, have a psychological impact on regional countries and weaken the expectation of a US strategy of encircling China (Lei, 2014, pp. 26–28). In the same interview, Jin Canrong of Renmin University, a leading US specialist, argued that although the New Asian Security Concept is categorically different from the Monroe Doctrine, the possibility cannot be ruled out that China might intend to leverage it to 'hedge' against the US 'pivot to Asia' strategy (Lei, 2014, pp. 26–28).

Indo-Pacific strategy and countermeasures

After Donald Trump took office in January 2017, the new US administration quickly unveiled the 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy, posing new challenges to the changing regional order. What are the implications of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy? How should China respond to such a strategy? Chinese scholars have been engaged in a heated debate on these issues.

Wei Zongyou (Wei, 2018, pp. 18–22) notes that the Indo-Pacific strategy is premised on the explicit recognition that China is a major strategic competitor of the US, therefore foreseeing a head-to-head contest between the

Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a large-scale connectivity project perceived by Washington as aimed at expanding China's sphere of influence. Sun Ru of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a leading government-affiliated think tank in China, argues that China should adopt a 'greater neighborhood' (*da zhoubian*) strategy to counter America's Indo-Pacific strategy. Beefing up diplomatic investments in neighboring countries, China should make more efforts to not only consult and coordinate with regional great powers such as Russia but also try to 'win over' small and middle powers in the region (Sun, 2017, pp. 27–29).

There are a small number of Chinese scholars who believe that India is where breakthroughs can be made in response to the US Indo-Pacific strategy. For instance, Lin Minwang, an India specialist at Fudan University highlights India's lack of strategic trust in the US (Lin, 2018a). Trump's trade protectionism has impacted the Indian economy negatively, which indirectly provides an incentive for New Delhi to improve Sino-Indian relations. Since Beijing and New Delhi share strong opposition to protectionism, Lin argues that as long as China maintains a good diplomatic relationship with neighboring countries including India, there is not too much to worry about regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy (Lin, 2018b, pp. 32–35). Ye Hailin, another India expert at the Institute for South Asia Studies, the CASS, however, holds a different view. Ye worries that there is a risk in pursuing an overly-accommodating policy toward India: that if China goes too far in an attempt to 'win over' India, it may be 'blackmailed' by New Delhi (Ye, 2018, pp. 1–14).

Quite a few Chinese scholars predict that the US Indo-Pacific strategy may not be implemented smoothly. For instance, Ling Shengli (Ling, 2019, pp. 14–16) notes that as President Trump's 'America First' policy and his hostility toward multilateralism estrange many Asian countries, China should seize the opportunity to improve ties with other major powers in the region. China's improvement in relationships with India and Japan since 2018 has increased Beijing's influence in the 'concert of great powers', which Ling believes will play a pivotal role in the development of a future regional order in Asia. Zhao Minghao, a researcher affiliated with the International Department of the CC-CPC argues that some ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand, fear that the Indo-Pacific strategy will challenge ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture, adding that the ROK is also prudent enough to choose to 'sit on the sidelines' (Zhao M., 2019, pp. 55–57). Zhao's view is shared by Wang Peng of Renmin University who notes that ASEAN is a 'weak link or loophole' in the US Indo-Pacific strategy that China can exploit (Wang, 2018, pp. 47–52). Zhang Jie, a Southeast Asia specialist at the CASS, holds that ASEAN's vision of the Indo-Pacific is aimed at striking a balance between China and the US. With an emphasis on maintaining the inclusiveness of the

Indo-Pacific region, it is different from the US Indo-Pacific strategy characterized by strong geopolitical flavor and China focus. Therefore, Zhang argues that China should uphold ASEAN's Indo-Pacific vision so as to counter the US Indo-Pacific strategy (Zhang, 2019, pp. 1–13).

Unlike the above-mentioned scholars, Song Wei of Renmin University (Song, 2018, pp. 30–34) holds a more pessimistic view, believing that the Indo-Pacific strategy may put China at a disadvantage. He notes that the roll-out of the Indo-Pacific strategy may have paved the way for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as QUAD), an informal security mechanism composed of four powers – the US, Japan, Australia, and India – to evolve into a more formal alliance targeting China. It is no longer easy for China to prevent the emergence of such an alliance, Song warns.

Intriguingly, unlike in the official Indo-Pacific Strategy document unveiled by the Trump administration, Chinese scholars do not see a zero-sum relationship between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific strategy. For example, Pang Zhongying at the Qingdao-based Ocean University of China argues that China should take the 'if you cannot beat them, join them' approach toward the US Indo-Pacific strategy. As a 'peaceful and artful' way to deal with the Indo-Pacific strategy, China should actively consider joining the Indo-Pacific alignment, Pang contends; although without specifying how China could succeed in doing it (Pang, 2019, p. 7). Similarly, Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University argues that the linkage between the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean indeed serves the interests of China. Therefore, China should consider the Indo-Pacific agenda as a way to 'penetrate into' the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific agenda will not stand in the way of the BRI undertakings and is economically beneficial to China. Therefore, China should partake in the kind of economic cooperation prescribed by the Indo-Pacific strategy (Zhao H., 2019, pp. 43–46). Zhang Jiadong, Director of the Center for Indian Studies at Fudan University, concurs that there is no need for China to completely reject the Indo-Pacific strategy. The BRI and the Indo-Pacific strategy are compatible with each other and China can choose to selectively cooperate with 'reasonable content' of the Indo-Pacific strategy (Zhang, 2018, pp. 1–26).

Debate over the SCO and the BRICS

Debate over the SCO expansion

The establishment of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) in 2001 was an important hallmark for China and like-minded regional countries to pursue a more balanced regional order. Six members joined the SCO upon its founding: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Since 2012, membership expansion has become an important

issue on the SCO agenda. Some Chinese scholars believe that an enlargement would give China an edge on shaping the future regional order, while others adopt a much more prudent attitude towards the SCO expansion.

The discussion over membership expansion of the SCO has heated up since 2012. Chen Xiaoding, a Central Asia specialist from Lanzhou University, in a co-authored article, argues that despite the inevitable tendency of the SCO enlargement, cons of the rush to expand outweigh the pros. While an enthusiastic Russia hopes to compete with the US by promoting the SCO enlargement, China should be concerned that an expansion may lower the organizational efficiency of the SCO, destabilize China's northwest border, and even turn the organization into an anti-US bloc (Chen & Wang, 2013, pp. 100–101). Zeng Xianghong, another Central Asia specialist from Lanzhou University, worried that China's political influence might be undermined if India and Iran joined the SCO. Zeng and his co-author caution that in the worst case scenario, Russia and India might join hands in 'squeezing' China's influence in the SCO (Zeng & Li, 2014, pp. 152–155).

There are, however, also scholars in favor of the SCO expansion. Wang Xiaoquan, a Russia and Central Asia specialist at the CASS, argues that on balance, an expansion of the SCO would be positive for China. Although the US intends to sow internal divisions and ruin the political cooperation of the SCO on the occasion of Indian accession, the joining of India and Pakistan would facilitate the 'trilogy of China, Russia and India' in promoting the development of the SCO, greatly improve its overall strength and international influence, and spread the New Asian Security Concept (Wang, 2015, pp. 94–100). Li Jinfeng, another specialist on Russia and Central Asia at the CASS, holds that the membership expansion of the SCO presents valuable opportunities but poses severe challenges, too. On the whole, there are more opportunities than challenges. The prospects of the post-expansion development of the SCO will primarily depend on whether China and Russia can establish an effective interactive mechanism (Li, 2015, pp. 42–44).

So far, with India and Pakistan having joined the SCO in 2017, the views of pro-expansion scholars seem to have been favored by the Chinese government. The SCO is likely to continue to grow as Beijing sees it as an important institution in helping to produce a multipolar and more balanced regional order.

BRICS

Jim O'Neill, the chief analyst of Goldman Sachs, coined the term BRIC in 2001, referring to an association of four major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, and China. The acronym was expanded to become BRICS when South Africa was included in the grouping in 2010. After the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, emerging economies such as BRICS were regarded

as an important force reshaping the regional and international orders. Particularly since June 2009 when BRIC leaders established a mechanism to meet on a regular basis, at their first formal summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, BRIC(S) has become a hot topic within both the Chinese scholarly and policy communities.

Some Chinese scholars are optimistic about the prospects of BRICS. Zhu Jiejun of Fudan University notes that the establishment of the BRICS Development Bank in 2012 marked a step from 'concept' to 'reality' in BRICS cooperation, which will help promote the reform of traditional international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and thus help shape a new international economic order (Zhu, 2014, p. 6; Zhu, 2015, pp. 24–25). Pu Ping of Renmin University (Pu, 2014, pp. 56–59) notes that all BRICS countries agree to build a fair and equal world order and uphold the UN-based multilateral mechanism. Therefore, the BRICS mechanism is of strategic value to China's multilateral diplomacy.

However, other scholars take a more cautious attitude on the prospect of the BRICS. Guo Shuyong from Shanghai International Studies University holds that even though the US dominance of the regional order would be further weakened by the continued growth of the BRICS countries, the BRICS will not be able to challenge the hegemony of the US (Guo & Shi, 2015, pp. 28–29). Similarly, Pang Zhongying argues that since the BRICS cooperation is still at an initial stage, with many uncertainties and fragilities, it is ill-advised to overestimate the influence of BRICS cooperation on the existing global and regional governance structures. The BRICS Bank or the New Development Bank and the Emergency Reserve Fund are far from being 'challenges' to or 'substitutes' for the World Bank and the IMF (Pang, 2014, pp. 33–35; Pang, 2017, pp. 40–41).

ASEAN and the regional order

Chinese scholars' discussions about ASEAN integration started from around 2000. Since 2012, most Chinese scholars have supported ASEAN integration, although a minority remain skeptical.

Men Honghua of Tongji University makes it clear that China should support ASEAN taking the driver's seat in regional integration. The reason being that neither China, nor Japan, or ROK is able to assume the leading role, and that the US' attempt to dominate the East Asian order has roused widespread vigilance among East Asian countries. On this basis, it is in the strategic interests of most East Asian countries, including China, to continue supporting ASEAN centrality in the shaping of the future regional order (Men, 2015, pp. 59–62).

Zhai Kun, a Southeast Asia expert at Peking University, holds that ASEAN, in an attempt to strike a balance among great powers, advocates the East Asia Summit (EAS)'s central position in the development of the regional order. The development of the EAS will help promote a more balanced regional order, and therefore China should seize the momentum to redesign a proactive strategy for participating in the EAS, thus harvesting 'positive interactions' and 'adaptable win-win outcomes' for all parties concerned (Zhai & Wang, 2016, pp. 43–46). Wu Xinbo notes that both China and ASEAN share similar outlooks on the regional order, advocate inclusiveness and openness, and stress the principles of equality and consensus-building. Such similarities, Wu argues, are the embodiment of the 'Asian way' or 'Asian experiences'. China, the US and ASEAN are three key players whose preferences and policy behaviors will greatly shape the future Asian regional order. Interestingly, Wu contends that the combined power of China and ASEAN will be greater than that of the US alone; therefore any future regional order will likely bear a more 'Asian imprint' (Wu, 2017, pp. 32–36). Ren Yuanzhe of Foreign Affairs University sees the emergence of a 'tripod' in Southeast Asia – with China providing economic public goods, the US strengthening military alliances, and ASEAN playing a leading role in regional integration. In a nutshell, China, due to its geographic advantages, still has the initiative in cooperating with ASEAN, and it is an irresistible trend for China to expand its influence in Southeast Asia (Ren, 2017, pp. 27–28).

However, a minority of scholars maintain a cautious attitude toward ASEAN integration. Specifically, Cao Yunhua, a leading Southeast Asia specialist at the Guangzhou-based Ji'nan University, notes that ASEAN has always regarded itself as the 'host', and other great powers the 'guests', when it comes to regional integration. While benefiting from China's robust economic growth, ASEAN still remains wary of China's growing military power and hopes to woo the US to counter-balance China (Cao, 2011, pp. 12–13). No great power would be able to dominate the future regional order without support from ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN plays an indispensable role in building a new regional order (Cao, 2018, pp. 13–17). Ge Hongliang, a Southeast Asia expert from Guangxi University for Nationalities, holds that ASEAN always prefers to be 'in the driver's seat' in regional affairs and to maintain regional peace through balance of power. In recent years, ASEAN, reflecting its rising suspicion of China, has adopted a soft balancing strategy against China through regional multilateral mechanisms (Ge, 2015, pp. 60–65).

The regional order of Northeast Asia

The regional order of Northeast Asia is another important topic that Chinese scholars have debated over the years. After 2012, a minority of

Chinese scholars proposed to eliminate or dilute US influence in Northeast Asia. Most Chinese scholars, however, do not advocate the exclusion of the US from Northeast Asia; rather, they believe that China should pursue 'co-leadership' with the US on the Northeast Asia regional order or otherwise establish a new regional security architecture in a gradual way.

Zhou Yongsheng of Foreign Affairs University contends that given that China, the ROK, and Japan retain profound Confucian traditions, Confucianism should be promoted as the dominant ideology for the regional order in Northeast Asia (Zhou, 2012, pp. 124–126). Similarly, Xue Li of the Institute of World Economics and Politics, the CASS, also proposes to rebuild a Chinese *li* (ritual)-based order. But instead of replacing the existing international order, Xue believes that such a Chinese *li*-based order should be compatible and coexist with it (Xue, 2018, pp. 135–138).

Believing that the Northeast Asian region needs to build a new security architecture, Shen Dingli nevertheless holds that such a goal does not require the immediate removal of the bilateral military alliance system built by the US. In fact, Shen acknowledges that the US-led bilateral military alliances are likely to co-exist with a Northeast Asia security architecture for a long time to come (Shen, 2011, pp. 26–27). Wang Junsheng, a Korea expert at the NIIS of the CASS, advises that China-US 'dual leadership' could be an ideal solution to Northeast Asian security problems; and that China and the US should develop mutual trust instead of staying suspicious of or trying to undermine each other (Wang, 2013, pp. 108–113). Likewise, Shi Yuanhua, a Korea expert at Fudan University contends that now and for a long time to come, the so-called 'compatible co-existence' of two security cooperation systems led by China and the US, respectively, will be a major characteristic of regional security dynamics, as well as an important precondition of regional cooperation in Asia. To fundamentally change the status quo and ask the US to withdraw from Northeast Asia is unrealistic if not impossible, and such a move will undermine not only China's economic development but also Asia's political stability (Shi, 2016, pp. 25–28). Such a view is echoed by Dong Xiangrong, another Korea specialist from the NIIS, CASS. Dong uses a vivid metaphor – 'renovating the temple rather than demolishing it' – to illustrate China's approach; China has been advocating gradual reform of the US-dominated regional order of Northeast Asia instead of seeking to overthrow the existing system (Dong, 2016, pp. 20–22).

There are still other scholars advocating the importance of the 'concert of great powers' in building the regional order in Northeast Asia. Believing that the concert of powers should be the main approach to solve the issue of order in Northeast Asia, Ren Jingjing from the CASS contends that China should not advocate completely eliminating US military presence in Northeast Asia (Ren, 2018, pp. 16–18; Ren, 2019, pp. 24–25). Gao Cheng

also notes that in the domain of regional security, China's strategic purpose is to form a mechanism of concert of great powers led by China and the US, allowing them to jointly exert influence upon regional countries (Gao, 2014, pp. 42–48).

The approach of gradually facilitating the transformation of the regional order has been endorsed by most Chinese scholars. Moreover, many further conclude that it is an effective approach for China to promote the transformation of the international order. For instance, Tang Shiping, a preeminent IR theorist at Fudan University, argues that China should work with other countries including the hegemon – the US – as much as possible to jointly facilitate the steady improvement and transformation of the international order, thus bringing benefits to the world. Tang holds that China has never attempted to challenge the fundamental 'bedrock institutions' of the existing international order, but rather seeks their gradual transformation through cooperation, in order to bring benefits to both developing and developed countries. Tang cautions that China should conduct careful assessments on the costs and risks associated with its policies to avoid falling into 'strategic over-extension' or 'strategic overdraft' (Tang, 2019, pp. 201–203).

Debate over the "Tributary system"/"Tianxia order"

As China rises rapidly, some Western analysts and politicians have come to believe that China is trying to restore the 'Tributary system' or the 'Tianxia order' from ancient China. A typical example is former US Secretary of Defence James Mattis. Speaking at the Naval War College's graduation ceremony in June 2018, Mattis said China 'harbored long-term designs to rewrite the existing global order', adding that 'the Ming Dynasty appears to be their model, albeit in a more muscular manner, demanding that other nations become tribute states kowtowing to Beijing' (Taylor, 2018).

In 2005 and 2009, Chinese political philosopher Zhao Tingyang published two books in which he tries to develop a *Tianxia* theory. In an attempt to renew the old Confucian concept, Zhao defines 'Tianxia' as a world consisting of three levels: the physical world (all lands under the sky); the psychological world (the general sentiments of peoples); and the institutional world (Zhang, 2010, p. 109). Claiming 'the world' is the highest level of political unit, Zhao argues that 'Tianxia' (all under heaven) is a better system than the Western-led international order (Zhao, 2005). Zhao's works, along with the idea of a tributary system, have generated heated debate within the IR community in China.

Seeing fundamental conflicts and contradictions between the Confucian *Tianxia*/Tributary system and the existing international order, Wang Qingxin of Tsinghua University argues that Confucian ethics or the *Wangdao*

(humane authority) does not have to be reflected by establishing the '*Tianxia system*'; nor is the '*Tianxia system*' necessarily better than the modern international order. Wang contends that it is impossible to restore the Confucian '*Tianxia system*', though acknowledges that there are many similarities between Confucian ethics and Christian cultural values, both of which are universal and therefore are able to be adopted as the guidance for contemporary international relations (Wang, 2016, p. 73).

Another criticism of Zhao is offered by Hu Jian of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, who argues that *Tianxia* was actually a tool for the rulers of ancient China to construct legitimacy and promote nationalism. Disputing Zhao's claim that *Tianxia* is a political unit that is beyond the state, Hu contends that *Tianxia* is indeed a political unit within the Chinese empire, and an ideological instrument for the rulers to maintain the 'grand unification' (*dayitong*) of the Chinese empire. Therefore, Hu insists that the term *Tianxia* should not be used in the vocabulary of contemporary Chinese foreign policy (Hu, 2017, pp. 195–203) (Wang 2015).

There are also many critics of the tributary system. For instance, Yang Shu of Gansu University argues that the maintenance of the tributary system relied upon China's authority and cultural influence rather than its power. In fact, however, most of the surrounding countries did not culturally or politically identify with the Middle Kingdom as much as the Middle Kingdom expected. The tributary system therefore was a loose system which did not have the same binding power of the multilateral institutions in modern international relations (Yang & Li, 2017, pp. 72–75). Yang Baoyun of Peking University contends that the BRI is not an attempt to restore the 'Chinese-barbarian order' based on the China-led tributary system in history; rather, it is indeed an inclusive cooperation process (Yang, 2014, p. 3).

In conclusion, the '*Tianxia system*' proposed by Zhao Tingyang has not been widely accepted by Chinese IR scholars, who – although believing that some of the political philosophies from ancient China could benefit today's international system – oppose the restoration of the hierarchical *Tianxia*/tributary system.

Conclusion

The rise of China will not only pose a challenge to US hegemony in East Asia, but also reshape the regional order in East Asia. Our survey on the Chinese scholarly debate on the regional order suggests that Washington might have exaggerated China's strategic intention. In the National Security Strategy Report released in December 2017, the Trump administration officially identified China as a major strategic competitor, claiming that China's strategic goal was to challenge the US-led 'Liberal International Order' and

to establish a 'parallel order' dominated by China. In fact, our examination of the scholarly debate in China shows that the majority of Chinese scholars do not advocate building a competing alliance to counter the US-led alliance system in East Asia. Indeed, China has always responded to the US alliance system in the region with defensive policies. Since 2009, there have been discussions among Chinese academia about how to deal with or even dismantle the US-led military alliance networks in the region, but these discussions were mostly 'reactive' responses as China's threat perception of the US increased with the unfolding of the US' pivot to Asia strategy. China has no strategic intention of pushing the US out of East Asia, and few, if any, Chinese scholars advocate a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine. Interestingly, Chinese scholars generally take a non-zero sum perspective on the relationship between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific strategy, and maintain that the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, most Chinese scholars explicitly recognize the leading role of the US in the regional order. Meanwhile, most Chinese scholars also believe that China should actively participate in the process of reforming the existing regional and international orders.

Since the new leadership took office in 2012, there has been both continuity and change in China's foreign policy. China's diplomacy is still fundamentally guided by the principles of peace and development. With the increase of China's national strength in recent years, China does believe that the US-led East Asian order needs to become more balanced, which has been prominently reflected in the discussions among Chinese academia and policymakers on issues such as the expansion of the SCO membership, China-ASEAN relations and the New Asian Security Concept. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these discussions are not aimed at displacing American primacy or promoting an alternative order, but rather at easing the strategic pressure from the US and achieving a more balanced distribution of power in Asia. This can also be observed in Chinese scholars' predilection for the concept of 'concert of great powers' in discussion on the regional order. Essentially, Chinese scholars advocate mutual accommodation between China and the US, rather than replacing US hegemony with a Chinese-led *Tianxia*/tributary system in the region.

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