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Rebranding China's Global Role: Xi Jinping at the World Economic Forum

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/02/20/rebranding-chinas-global-role-xi-jinping-at-the-world-economic-forum/

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In 2017, Xi Jinping became the first premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to attend the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos. At this summit, one that both exemplifies and upholds the liberal international order, President Xi delivered the opening plenary in order to address not only the gathering of the global financial elite, but also the forthcoming challenges he surveyed concerning the then new Trump administration. Four years later, Xi Jinping once again delivered a special address at the WEF 2021, this time online however due to the COVID-19 measures, a few days apart from the US President Biden taking office. One could argue that such timing could be a coincidence, or, rather a deliberate choice. Nevertheless, it is a fact that President Xi's participations in the WEF have coincided, interestingly, with the inaugurations of United States (US) Presidents Trump and Biden. The timing of these speeches indicates that the WEF can provide a platform for the President of the PRC to deliver a monologue indirectly aimed at the President-elect of the US in front of a global audience; allowing Chinese leadership to both present the perspective and demonstrate that its great power status is equal with that of the US. Another reason for such a choice of timing could concern the clarification of China's position on the global issues, especially since the Chinese leadership is required to further explain its numerous positions to the world in order to overcome its 'closed book' image if it does not want keeping a low-profile anymore. The final reason includes addressing the upcoming challenges via normative grounds in order to promote certain grand principles.

In his latest speech, Xi is more inclined to demonstrate the malpractice of the trade wars and great power confrontation. The real intention seems to prevent the continuation of such confrontation and malpractice by the Biden administration. When the whole world tries to catch a hint from the new American leadership, concerning its stance on the matter and other global issues, Xi can also draw the global audience's attention. The WEF could be used as leverage, considering Xi's efforts in rebranding his country's global role and shaping the image of a global power. China consistently claims that, its global role in international order will be different than the usual great power practices that western powers have demonstrated. China has already become the world's second-largest economy but its grand strategy remains vague in relation to the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy behavior. The "rise of China" phenomenon acknowledges the success of the opening up policies, yet it re-establishes certain hegemonic relations.

This study indicates that Xi's idealistic vision of China's global role is adjusting the grand strategy of China as a whole. It can be considered as the third major adjustment in grand strategy after Mao and Deng by leaving behind cautious and low-profile diplomacy. To understand what China wants to do with its wealth and power, researchers have to explain how Beijing sees the world and how it has ascribed a role in that "international order". Thus, this paper analyzes this self-proclaimed role through Xi Jinping's speeches in the WEF and searches its coherence with a general framework, as the adjustment of China's grand strategy.

The Debate on China's Grand Strategy: Peaceful or Assertive

The notion of grand strategy could provide a conceptual framework for the discussions of China's global role, even though there is still an ongoing debate, as Milevski (2016) summarizes, on how the concept should be defined. According to Silove (2017), grand strategy embodies three key concepts these being (a) grand plans, (b) grand

principles, and (c) grand behavior. Although these facets present distinct frameworks, all three have to be in accordance with a self-proclaimed global role. Much of the debate surrounding China's grand strategy has evolved around two issues. Firstly, the trajectory of China's growing capabilities and influence in world politics, and secondly, the different scenarios that could arise in response by other states, especially the US. The contemporary scholarship on China's grand strategy is mainly grouped into two approaches, either generally passive peaceful or assertive and somewhat aggressive. These contradicting perspectives provide distinct narratives on the conceptual framework surrounding China's grand strategy, whilst equally elaborating on what China really wants to achieve and how other states should devise their perceptions in response.

In line with the firm commitment of the Chinese official narrative on "peaceful rise/development cooperation", the first approach considers China's grand strategy as peaceful, pragmatic, development-oriented, and defensive. As Danner (2018) notes the consistency from Zhou Enlai's peaceful coexistence to Deng Xiaoping's 24-character foreign policy doctrine, the key components of peaceful rise approach can be identified as domestic development and economic growth, whilst emphasizing the significant historical progress one can observe with China's long path of development. Those developmental achievements, which enable becoming the world's second-largest economy, make Beijing embrace a role as the defender of globalization, multilateralism, and global growth in the following decades. This comprehensive vision covers not only a self-proclaimed role in the global system, but also others' perception of these achievements in all fields as Buzan (2014) points out. Thus, the backbone of Xi's vision, as like his predecessors', is to persuade others not to pose any threats to their interest, at first. It has been argued, notably by Luttwak (2012), that this type of narrative offers guarantees to other states by ruling out some threatening possibilities, especially since China's economic and military capability henceforth permits Chinese unilateral action. Secondly, foreign affairs have to be constructed on a foundation of mutual respect, the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, the safeguarding of an international order underpinned by international law and norms, and 'win-win' cooperation without conflict or confrontation.

In this framework, sharing the benefits of development has often been achieved through either comprehensive agreements or more inclusive partnerships, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As Johnston (2003) and Wang (2016) noted, the political-economic determinants create high hopes for China to leave behind any revisionist agenda to be a reasonable, status quo power, integrated with the international community than ever before. The major adjustment in grand strategy that we have observed, with its priorities centred on social prosperity and economic development starts with Deng Xiaoping's premiership. Unlike Mao's ideology-driven grand plans, such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward, the adjustment of Deng can be found in the notion of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the reforms and opening-up policy for the first steps of economic integration with the world, and his cautious stance in keeping a low-profile commonly referred through the 'hide your capabilities, bide your time' dictum. In the end, this shift in grand strategic design would create Zheng's (2005) homegrown label peaceful rise/peaceful development.

However, the 2008 global financial crisis crystalized that China could no longer hide its capabilities, so how long will it bide its time and for what purposes? This main question gave momentum to the second approach to China's grand strategy, which considers it rather offensive, aggressive, or at least assertive. As described in Khalilzad et al. (1999), Swaine and Tellis (2000), Clinton (2011), China has already considered as a strategic competitor of the US instead of a strategic partner even before the peaceful rise discourse came into prominence. Therefore, the peaceful rise narrative is considered as a calculative cover for economic, military, and political ascent. However, both Johnston (2013) and Jerdén (2014) emphasize, there has to be a critical point in promoting a new kind of politicized assertiveness based on exaggerating known claims, usual responses and reactions. Chinese leaders and academics have always attached importance to overall national strength, despite their persistent denial of any hegemonic ambition, or predominance in world affairs. Although an assertive turn indicates a major deviation from Deng and his successors' cautious dictum on keeping the low profile, this assertive approach directs attention to China's national capability alongside economic might, territorial/maritime claims that have even been discussed by Acharya (2011) as an Asian or Chinese Monroe Doctrine, and the practices of former rising powers to status quo.

These aspects present the main contradiction in analyzing China's global role and grand strategy under Xi Jinping. On one side, there is a strong and successful tradition focusing on development, economic success, and upholding

low profile diplomacy. On the other side, there has always been a suspicious approach towards the peaceful rise narrative, whether Xi Jinping promotes the BRI, big power diplomacy, or territorial/maritime claims. Xi's remarks in the WEF suggest that his era is merging these contradicting aspects. It would create an image of a more assertive China in all fields from economics to domestic or foreign policies; yet, it still sticks to the core narrative of peaceful rise discourse by rebranding them with multilateralism, cooperation, and win-win relations.

Xi Jinping and the Global Audience through the World Economic Forum

In the light of these contradicting approaches, what do Xi's speeches at the WEF signal about his country's global role? It is clear that Xi's approach to China's global role is more assertive than his predecessors'. Hu (2015) defines this turn as a rejuvenated role with an ambitious and innovative in foreign policy thinking since Xi promotes national ambitions such as 'the China Dream', the Belt and Road Initiative, or big power diplomacy with distinctive Chinese characteristics. However, Xi's discourse is still committed to the peaceful rise approach, with a more inclusive narrative on the Global South, multilateralism, win-win relations, and peaceful coexistence of all parties. The timing of these speeches at the WEF indicates that Xi's speeches can be seen as an indirect monologue with the President-elect of the US in front of the global audience. It has been argued by Zhao (2015) and Wang (2019) that China wants a new kind, special major power diplomacy for Sino-American relations, which has implied by Xi as in calling for "a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major country". Although there is no answer if there is room left for a third party in this big power relationship, Xi's (2021) call for mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence, and "consultation and cooperation instead of conflict and confrontation" firstly refer to the relations among great powers. It is rebranding the grand strategy and global image of the country by burying low-profile diplomacy.

Secondly, the annual WEF meeting is a gathering of different parties that form the liberal international order, parties from the worlds of business, finance, politics and academia. Following the tensions and trade war with the US, Beijing, yet again, positioned itself as the defender of globalism, multilateralism, sustainable and equal economic development, and global growth. For the sustainability of China's economic growth, it is vital to defend those principles and to declare commitment to the benefits of globalization. The key point in Xi's speeches has been to highlight the benefits of the integration into the global economy without ignoring problems of the global economy and the doubts about globalization that China used to hold. His possible solutions are structural reforms for sustainable global growth, a new industrial revolution, and a new win-win model of cooperation. In the 2021 speech, the gist of these solutions shifts from the reformist agenda into the multilateral relationship instead of unilateral action. When Xi states "the strong should not bully the weak", China positions itself as the champion of weak to preserve international laws and rules, openness, togetherness, multilateralism instead of supremacy.

The general theme in Xi's speeches in 2017 and 2021 refer to keeping up with the changes that time brings, which emphasizes making room for China, as a new, strong actor in the game and leaving behind those malpractices of "the strong". China is yet to encourage an alternative economic and political development path as distinct from what the Western world has promoted. The real question has to be asked about whether or not these are footsteps of an alternative vision for global order or the components of an objective in shaping international norms and order with Chinese characteristics. The latter is much closer to Xi's discourse in front of domestic and foreign audiences.

Thirdly, there is a pattern in Xi's speeches to address the global problems and solutions at first, and China's role in that framework towards the end. Xi's 2017 speech was closer to the theme of peaceful rise theme by underlining the long route of development that China has been taking for decades. It is important to note that the peaceful rise narrative outlines what China has achieved so far in its route of development, instead of its present great power capabilities. However, his latest speech is much closer to the self-promoted global role on development cooperation, a great power status in implementing a win-win strategy, and active participation in the solution of the global problems from pandemic to the global warming. In 2017, the focus of Xi's speech was to defend China's position in a globalized world against the upcoming confrontation of the Trump administration. In his 2021 speech, we can see an extension of such unilateral confrontation into a pluralist front by "lighting up the torch of multilateralism", "extensive consultation and consensus-building", in the name of a "better future for all humanity". Thus, what is a problem for China is no longer an issue for China solely alone, but all its partners in cooperation.

Conclusion

This study indicates that China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping is heading in a more assertive direction, yet still preserving a defensive-oriented foundation. President Xi's approach is rebranding a narrative of peaceful rise with international development cooperation and employing an increasingly assertive stance on global issues, and the national objectives as "the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". In this assertive turn, both in domestic and foreign policy, these objectives have been blamed for igniting long-term competition and tension in an interdependent great power politics. It has to be understood as the third major adjustment in China's grand strategy. It is aiming a rather assertive stance for leaving behind low profile global role and achieving the goals of national ambitions while praising Xi Jinping thought and premiership along with Mao and Deng as seen in a decade.

It can be expected that there will be internal bipartisan support for US policy towards an assertive China, just as the Trump administration had in the cases of Huawei, Hong Kong sanctions, or the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act for example. In that regard, China once again has to place an emphasis on the notion that external perception of policy and strategy is just as significant as the action taken, and that goes for more than just the perceptions of great powers. Therefore, the change in others' perception of threat from China's assertive turn seems to be the key factor in forging development cooperation. Moreover, this will decide whether the United States and China fall into a new Cold War. Such a new Cold War narrative can easily be adapted to China's assertiveness, yet it cut corners in order to compare and contrast the new conjuncture.

Xi's latest speech at the WEF has a clear reference to the zero-sum nature of the Cold War for the sake of preventing anew great power confrontation. There is no need to limit China a responsible power as Xi mentioned in his speech in 2017. China is now pursuing the pioneering role of establishing a multilateral front, a front "committed to keeping up with the times instead of rejecting change", which has implied in Xi's last speech at the WEF 2021. If "keeping up with the times" refers to the notion that the time has come for China to stop biding its time, the whole world will decide on that future, instead of another unilateral approach to the issue. In search of China's global role and grand strategy, the scholarship on great power relations needs to look at Mr. Xi instead of searching for an anonymous "Mr. X. (Jr.)" in order not to call for the Cold War 2.0.

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