

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54418/ca-96.239>

CHINESE EXCEPTIONALISM: THE SINO-CENTRIC WORLD AND US THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Tasleem Malik* & Ansar Jamil**

Abstract

Exceptionalism in IR is the unique and exceptional behavior of a state in the domain of foreign policy. Unlike the Manifest Destiny of the US, which emerged as an exceptional power to govern the world with its liberal tradition, value system, and governance model, those witnessing the history unfolding in the 21st century can observe more and more nation-states/civilizations behaving exceptionally. The rise of the discourse of exceptionalism, informed by universal values and rooted in civilizational heritage, producing an essentialist 'Self' and the Other, is perceived as a threat to the status quo and the so-called peaceful and rules based international system. Using an interpretative approach, this paper deals with how China perceives itself and behaves as an exceptional power. It also discusses the perceptions of threat in the US arising from Chinese exceptionalism.

Keywords: Exceptionalism, threat perception, China, America, Foreign policy, world order, responsible power. Tianxia

Introduction

The US has dominated world politics as the global hegemon and an exceptional power. US exceptionalism is ingrained in the American

* Assistant Professor, National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad.
Email: tasleem.malik@cips.nust.edu.pk

**Professor of Practice at Center of International Peace and Stability, NUST, Islamabad. Email: ansar.jamil@cips.nust.edu.pk.

conviction that it differs qualitatively from other nation-states due to its distinct origins, historical evolution, unparalleled political and religious institutions, as well as its economic and military might. As an exceptional power with a conviction in superior self and the belief that the world needs to emulate or adapt to the American way, America demands to be perceived and treated differently. Johannes Thimm explains this in America's exceptional attitude towards international human rights and humanitarian laws.¹ America exempts itself from the provisions of international treaties/ laws by explicit reservations, non-ratification, and non-compliance. The discourse of American exceptionalism goes a long way and permeates every period of American history. However, the triumph of America in World War II and the end of the Cold War with the coming of the unipolar moment, or the 'end of history'² for other ideologies, is said to have locked/ reinforced America's perception of the Self as the leader of the world, the land of free, leader of democratic order and a beacon of hope for the humanity.³ But unlike being the Manifest Destiny of America, those who are witnessing not an 'end of history' but history unfolding itself, can observe that American history is not unique in the show of exceptional behavior.⁴ We see more and more civilization states, including China, Iran, Japan, Turkey, and India, exhibiting exceptionalism in global politics. Of these multitudes, this paper focuses on China as an exceptional power.

Like individuals, nations may have multiple narratives of the Self and national identities. In other words, a state might have multiple "possible selves".⁵ Of the multiple identities China carries, this paper focuses on the identity of China as an exceptional power. The positioning of a state in global politics either as a global power, a responsible power, a cultural power, or as the exceptional state has objective, subjective, and intersubjective dimensions. The objective dimension deals with the material capabilities and indicators to determine the positioning of a state. These objective dimensions of China's global positioning have been extensively debated by scholars⁶ and are beyond

¹Johannes Thimm, "American Exceptionalism—Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Evidence, *Paper für die Tagung der Nachwuchsgruppe "Internationale Politik"*, 13(2007):14.

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*. (Free Book Publishers,1992).

³ Uzma Siraj and Najimdeen Bakare, "Iran—USA Relations: From Exceptionalism to Containment Policy", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9, no.1(2022): 99-121.

⁴ Kalevi Holsti. Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it exceptional?", *European Journal of International Relations* 17(3) (September 2011) :381–404.

⁵Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius. "Possible Selves", *American Psychologist* 41(9), (1986): 954–969.

⁶ See for instance, David Shambaugh, "The Illusion of Chinese Power", *The National Interest*, (June 25,2014), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-illusion-chinese-power->

the scope of this paper. It is the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of China's identity as an exceptional power and responsible power which will be discussed here. In terms of material capabilities, the rise of China has, according to a few scholars, caused a 'security dilemma' or the 'rising dilemma,' triggering challenges, an arms race, and backlash from within the region where China resides and by the international system. Ruizhuang Zhang suggests that it has generated anxiety and strategic uncertainty in the West, particularly in the US.⁷ In a similar vein, the emerging discourses and debates on China as a rising power (though the status as a superpower or its aspiration to be one is contentious) and exceptional power has also triggered threat perceptions in US policy circles (since China is contesting hegemonic space with the US if not yet dislocated the US's global position - monopolizing the status of global power, the exceptional power and the responsible power). The threat perception in the US arises partly from how China behaves or how America perceives China's behaviors in the international system and partly from how China perceives itself and the rest of the world as 'Other'. This paper focuses on China's perception of the 'exceptional self' and its intersubjective dimensions, particularly its reception by the US, with whom China is contesting over the status of 'exceptional power'.

Conceptualizing Exceptionalism in IR

The idea of exceptionalism is not novel in the domain of IR. Rooted in Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereign's exception to suspend everyday normality or norm,⁸ the concept has, in the recent years, gained significant traction for IR community and the foreign policy analysts. Schmitt's argument contains the element of sovereignty and sovereign decisionism, '*the ability to decide what shall count as normal*'. Schmitt's concept is excessively metaphysical and premised upon Jean Bodin's concept of sovereignty. For Bodin it is the "right for the sovereign to violate rules in order to deal with extraordinary situations"⁹. In the field of IR and foreign policy, exceptionalism means unique attributes ranging from particular historical trajectory, peculiar social and political values, and unique foreign relations experiences. The discourse of exceptionalism by any nation-state is self-referential and self-centered and produces an essential self and the 'Other'.

[10739](#); Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?", *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 5 (Sep. - Oct 1999): 24-36

⁷ Ruizhuang Zhang, "Guoji geju bianhua yu zhongguo dingwei [Change of International System and China's Positioning]", *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, [Contemporary International Relations] 4 (2013): 20-22

⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, (The MIT Press, 1998).

⁹Ronnie Hjorth, The Poverty of Exceptionalism in International Theory, *Journal of International Political Theory* 10, no. 2 (2014):169-187.

Just as American exceptionalism has long dominated the debates in IR and foreign policy studies, the notion of Chinese exceptionalism has, in the recent past, attracted the attention of scholarly debates on Chinese foreign policy¹⁰. Scholars have touched upon the subject of exceptionalism from different angles/perspectives, broadly focusing on ideational and structural/material factors that inform Chinese exceptionalism. Martin Jacques focuses on the cultural and historical experiences informing uniqueness in Chinese behavior and having nothing in common with the West¹¹. Samuel Kim has distinguished between the Chinese Middle Kingdom Complex and America's Manifest Destiny¹². Besides historical and cultural elements, the international system's structural constraints and power dynamics have also shaped how China behaved.¹³ The structural conditions were responsible for the perception of centrality and superiority in imperial China: absence of a rival in its vicinity, material superiority, and peculiar geography. Some scholars have suggested the peculiarity of Chinese exceptionalism as 'inward looking'.¹⁴ Feng Zhang has highlighted three features of Chinese exceptionalism: benevolent pacifism, great power reformism and harmonious inclusionism.¹⁵

Exceptionalism is essential to China's self-perception, world view, and ideals regarding international relations. This perception of one's Self as an exceptional actor on the international stage also provides an important source of policy ideas, such as the constructs of "great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusions" produced in the official and semiofficial discourses on China's rise as a 'Great power'¹⁶. In order to distinguish China's policy decisions from those of the West the foreign policy makers and Chinese IR scholars frequently refer to the phrase "with Chinese characteristics". Implicit in such constructions/ phrases is the perception of the Chinese paradigm of global politics being distinctly superior alternative to the western political paradigm. The prevailing global order, as viewed by

¹⁰ Benjamin Ho, "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China's Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness", *Alternatives* 39, no. 3 (2014):164-176; William Callahan, "Chinese visions of self and other: the international politics of noses". *International Affairs* 99(5), (2023) :2079-2099, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad174>.

¹¹ Martin Jacques, *When China rules the world: The end of the western world and the birth of a new global order* (UK: Penguin, 2009).

¹² Sameul Kim, "Chinese Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice". In *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*, edited by Sameul Kim (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998) :3-33.

¹³ Feng Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 19(2), (2011):1-24.

¹⁴ Barry Buzan, China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(1), (Spring 2010) : 5-36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pop014>.

¹⁵ Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism", 6-10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

China, is highly flawed and needs reforms. Particularly in the post-2008 financial crisis the fragility and vulnerability of the Western-dominated system are exposed. Instead, China claims to provide a better alternative order premised upon the idea of ‘goodness’ and greatness rather than hegemonic domination.¹⁷

Despite a wide range of literature and scholarly debates on the issue, the notion of Chinese exceptionalism is highly contested and has given rise to skepticism. Skeptics argue that China is expected to behave in the way that is typical of all major powers, i.e., maximizing its share in global politics and dominating the international system. John Mearsheimer in ‘*China’s Unpeaceful Rise*’ mentions that as US has dominated the Western hemisphere, China will try to dominate Asia and will make sure that no Asian power has the wherewithal to challenge its supremacy and threaten it.¹⁸ However, the official Chinese discourse rejects this and claims a peaceful rise. As William Callahan observes,

*“Beijing often says that the PRC will be a moral power, as opposed to a hegemonic one like the United States. Yet, when Chinese leaders and citizen intellectuals insist that the PRC will never be hegemonic, they are not saying that China will not dominate; they are merely saying that the PRC will never see itself as immoral, which, as experience shows, few countries do”.*¹⁹

The recent evidence, however contradicts China’s claims and a passive acceptance of the status quo. As far as the asserting the rights over its territorial claims, the use of force should not be ruled out.²⁰ China’s military modernization as demonstrated in the recent V-Day parade is a clear message for the West that China is seeking by all means to consolidate its position as a central pole in the multipolar world.

Chinese Exceptionalism

In order to understand how China behaves as an exceptional power, it is pertinent to trace the genealogy of Chinese exceptionalism in different epochs of history because a country’s perception as an exceptional self is, to a greater extent, history and culture-bound or is a historical and cultural understanding. Moreover, this genealogical analysis will deconstruct and challenge the myth

¹⁷ Ho, “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism”, 11-14.

¹⁸ John Maersheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History* 105(690), (April 2006): 160–162.

¹⁹ William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 158.

²⁰ Ho, “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism”, 172.

of Chinese exceptionalism by exposing the continuities and ruptures in the claim.

To understand the relevance of past and history to Chinese current strategic imperative Henry Kissinger in *On China* narrates an event when in 1962 China was locked in a standoff over a disputed border with India and Mao Zedong, the revolutionary leader, called his top military command and political leadership. He told them that China and India had fought one and a half war and that lessons can be drawn from these. The first took place when Chinese troops were sent to support an Indian Kingdom in fending off an aggressor during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Both nations experienced centuries of religious and commercial exchanges following the campaign. The lesson for the troops was that both countries are not doomed to be perpetual enemy and can enjoy peaceful relations. The half war was fought when Mongol ruler Tamerlane sacked Delhi. Tamerlane got significant victory when in Delhi his army massacred over 100,000 prisoners. This was a half Sino-Indian war since Mongolia was then part of China. This time, Chairman Mao advised his troops to remain “restrained and principled”. In contemporary world, no leader would invoke strategic principles from a millennium-old event to initiate a national undertaking. Kissinger argues that no leader can expect his colleagues to acknowledge the importance of such an allusion. China is singular.²¹

Societies and nation-states cherish the tales of their origin and claim pristine exceptionalism. The idea of American exceptionalism existed even before the birth of the United States as a nation.²² Similarly, a unique characteristic of Chinese exceptionalism is that it seems to have no beginnings; it is perceived as a natural phenomenon that has existed since time immemorial. Even in the references about the Yellow Emperor who is revered as the founding hero in the foundational/ originary myths of Chinese civilization, he is mentioned as reestablishing, not creating, an empire. Similarly, the founder of Chinese culture, the ancient sage and philosopher Confucius, emphasized that “he had created nothing and that he was only seeking to ‘reinvigorate’ the principles of harmony that had once prevailed in the golden age”²³.

The exceptionalism of Imperial China was characterized by Sino-centrism and *Tianxiaism*; its manifestation is embodied in imperial China’s discourse about centrality and superiority. Since ancient times, China has perceived *Zhongguo* (literally ‘the Middle Kingdom’) as having a Heavenly Mandate and being

²¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Penguin, 2011), 24.

²² John Winthrop. “A Model of Christian Charity”. Sermon, December 31, 1630. From Teaching American History, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/a-model-of-christian-charity-2/> (accessed October 20, 2024).

²³ Kissinger, *On China*, 28

superior to the other. According to Chiang Kai-shek, *Zhongguo* was not merely a geographical and cultural idea, but was a politically loaded concept. It was believed that who controls *Zhongguo*, would be the legitimate ruler over Tianxia (all under the Heaven)²⁴. Tianxia was ruled by the Son of Heaven, guided by Confucian principles of governance and stipulated a system of hierarchical order. China considered itself the center of the world — the “Middle Kingdom”. The early development of Chinese civilization, the absence of any rival civilization of comparable magnitude and culture in its vicinity, and its unique geography also contributed to its perception of centrality and superiority and by extension exceptionalism.

States interacting with China were required to recognize their status in the Sino-centric hierarchy by performing the ritual of 'Kow-Tow'. The ‘tribute system in China's unique art of foreign policy further explains the perception of the Chinese Self as superior to the rest of the world morally, culturally, and materially. Societies known to China were assessed in gradients —from the civilizational core (China) to the barbarous periphery, depending on their proximity to Chinese civilization, cultural, and political system. Implicitly, these gradients determined not only the extent to which one is civilized but also the degree to which they are human and claim the rights assigned to humans by international norms. Those located at the uncivilized margins were no more deserving than the animals. This also reflects the sovereign decisionism in Schmitt’s concept of exceptionalism.²⁵ China as a sovereign [dominant/hegemon power] declares the ‘others’ as lesser, uncivilized barbarians and hence expendable if their interests clash with the interest of Chinese.

Unlike American exceptionalism, which is proselytizing and missionary in character, spreading its values and political system as norms, China does not espouse its values as universal and relevant to the world and hence did not consider to preach its civilization. Yet Chinese language, language, and political institutions were regarded as the defining features of civilization, such that the foreign conquerors and the regional rivals emulated them in varying extent as a source of their own legitimacy. The perception of exceptional self with historical entitlement to the status of central power and moral superiority was rooted in a distinct perception of history and culture and was expressed in imperial China’s art of diplomacy. The borders separating Middle Kingdom from its neighbors were markers of cultural differentiations rather than territorial demarcations²⁶. The Chinese Emperor did not hold “summit meetings” with foreign heads of the state and rulers. Rather such encounters of the Emperor with the foreign ruler symbolized the gracious

²⁴ See Kissinger, *On China*; Ho, “The Rise of China Political Worldview”, 21

²⁵ Schmitt, “Political Theology”, 36

²⁶ Kissinger, *On China*, 33

reception of visitors from far off lands, who offered tribute as an acknowledgment of the Sino-Centric world by performing the Kow–Tow.

Inclusionism and pacifism were two other characteristics of Chinese exceptionalism beyond Sino centrism, and this was illustrated in a letter of Ming Dynasty's emperor Hongwu (r. 1368–98) to Japan in 14th century, which read:

“In the past when the emperors ruled the Tianxia, all who were lit by the sun and moon, whether near or far, were treated with impartiality. Thus, with Zhongguo stable and peaceful, [the countries in] all four directions were in their proper places, and there was no intention to make them submit (to Zhongguo). ... We are bringing mutual peace and calm to all countries far and near so that all may enjoy the good fortunes of peace”²⁷

Contemporary and emerging Chinese exceptionalism is professed to be identified with Great power reformism, harmonious inclusionism and benevolent pacifism²⁸. China rejects the Western model of a great power rise and believes in harmonious inclusions. Harmonious inclusionism is in contrast with the Sino centrism and was professed during imperial China and the revolutionary PRC. It implies a rejection of the dominance of one country or ideology and the adoption of an open, tolerant, and inclusive policy and harmonious coexistence in dealing with the world. For instance, President Xi's ideas for the new world order is reflected in the Global Security Initiative (GSI). It includes some proposals as guidelines for International affairs and diplomacy and for making the world a safer place. It recommends the countries a peaceful settlement or resolution of disputes through dialogue, respecting the differences, and respecting the varying national interests in order to ensure security for all.²⁹ In April 2022, President Xi, in a speech, emphasized the significance of collective responsibility for global peace and security since all nations are bound together in a common destiny much like the passenger aboard a same vessel.³⁰ This can be traced in discourses on harmony with difference, the harmonious world, and neo-Tianxia. Urging upon the global community, President Xi Jinping emphasized upon creating a world with lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity and a shared future for humanity. He called for a world that is open, inclusive, clean and beautiful. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held

²⁷ Liang-Sheng, Cheng. "Supplement & Revision of "Sino-Japanese Inter-Relations in Ming History" (Taipei, 1981):149.

²⁸Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism", pp6-10.

²⁹ Micheal Schuman, "How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order", *The Atlantic* (July 13,2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/07/china-xi-jinping-global-security-initiative/670504/>.

³⁰ Ibid

in 2017 president Xi , made a global call for “a community with a shared future for mankind and the People’s Court of Justice”.³¹ At the opening of 20th National Congress in 2022 and during the Boao Forum for Asia President Xi emphasized upon China’s commitment to peaceful rise and a win-win cooperation while explicitly rejecting any ambitions claims for hegemonic expansionism .He argued that maintaining global peace and stability requires nations to work together for peace. He cautioned that clinging to Cold War era mentality, bloc rivalries and power politics would only undermine and endanger global peace, and would add to the security dilemma in the 21st century.³²

US Threat perception

The discourse of exceptionalism is not without effects or implications. In the Greater West and especially in the U.S, this has raised concern about the rise of China as a revisionist power and competitor; in “a contest for the future of the world,”³³ that wants to reshape the world order that the US leads. This study discusses the concerns in the US political and policy circles that China wants to revise this US-led world order—bestow rewards and punishments (as the policeman) and shape the discourse. Beijing’s strategic vision and the chances of its successful implementation rely upon an iron-fisted, autocratic rule grounded in a “leverage web” of coercive power, political repression and pervasive apparatus of heavy surveillance, censorship which Washington apprehends could become globally accepted practices ³⁴. Trump and Biden administrations have asserted that China seeks to challenge and restructure the existing world order in a way that is antithetical to US values and strategic interests³⁵. Graham Allison has cautioned that the

³¹ Beato N.Mushinda et al., “The Xi Jinping’s Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: Understanding in China-Africa Cooperation”, *Open Journal of Political Science*, no. 13 (2023) : 230, doi: [10.4236/ojps.2023.132014](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2023.132014).

³²Minister of Foreign affairs, The People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference”,

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdffyq/202204/t20220421_10671083.html.

³³Ibid

³⁴, Christopher A.Ford. "Xi Jinping, Michael Foucault, and Spy Balloons? Communist China's Theory of Control and Visions of a Post-Westphalian World Order.", *Nat'l Sec. LJ* 11(1), (2023):1-54.

³⁵ See for instance, EXEC OFFICE OF THE PRESEIDENT , “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Dec. 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> ; EXEC OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT,National Security Startegy,White House Washington (Oct, 12, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>. Also see Suisheng Zhao, “A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order” , *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(113), (2018): 644, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458029-

foremost geostrategic challenge today is not terrorism or violent Islamic extremists nor a revanchist Russia. Rather it is the implications of China's rise for the US-led and US-dominated international order. Allison claimed that this development will disrupt the unprecedented great-power peace and prosperity that the world enjoyed under US led order for the past 70 years.³⁶ Particularly it is apprehended in US national security strategy that China wants to displace US in the Indo-Pacific and reorder the region in its favor expanding the reaches of its state driven economic model.

There is some element of truth in the apprehensions in United States as China seems to be uneasy with US dominance and wants to revise the contemporary world order. It regards the US-led world order as unfairly stacked in favor of the US and its allies and unreasonable to accommodate the emerging powers and criticizes the USA's double standards regarding the rules of the international system³⁷. Oct 2023, President Xi's speech in front of world leaders from Africa, Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, celebrating the tenth anniversary of BRI, depicted China positioning itself as an 'alternative standards-setter' for the developing world in areas such as climate resilience, artificial intelligence, and attainable modernization. China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), as mentioned above and as President Xi Jinping argues, can make the world a safer place, demonstrates that President Xi envisions China taking lead not only in executing global governance but also in why and how it should exist. But why would China want so?³⁸

China considers the contemporary order unjust as its norms and rules were set in the context of American dominance, and it demands conformity to the 'universal values' of democracy, free market and human rights. The order naturally ostracizes China for having a different political and economic order and blames it for human rights violations. Politically America's actions and policies in/towards Afghanistan and Iraq in a drive to spread democracy defy any regard for sovereignty. Economically the Bretton wood institutions and US-led global trade rules and enforcement mechanism favor western economies at the expense of marginalized Global South. Resisting the US-model, China seeks to co-opt a minimalist international order with more leeway for the states to conduct themselves as they feel fit. As for the global-

³⁶ Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for war?' *The Atlantic*, (September 24, 2015), <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

³⁷ Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder", 644.

³⁸ Johanna, M. Costigan, "China's Vision for World Order", *China File*, (December 7, 2023). <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/chinas-vision-world-order>

governance, China demands a shift from US dominance to an East–West joint governance.³⁹

Secondly, China criticizes America for its Janus-like attitude regarding the compliance of the rules and norms of the order created by America itself. Since World War II, US has taken lead in building the international rules to guide the conduct of other states and has frequently disregarded the rules, using them instead to constrain others. Washington insists that other states comply with treaty rules that the United States itself has failed to comply with. For instance, the prohibition on the use of force in the absence of UNSC authorization except in cases of self-defense was undermined by the US-led NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US-led coalition. In the absence of an imminent attack, US justified its action by invoking the doctrine of preemption. While American leaders admonish China on not regarding the rules-based international order, the Chinese view America's invasion of Iraq as unjust, and illegal disturbing the peace and regional order in Middle East and undermining international law.⁴⁰

The rule based international order is premised upon the principles of sovereignty and legal equality of the states. The state sovereign units of the Westphalian State system represent a sovereign people and enjoy a prerogative of autonomy and noninterference in internal affairs. The units in the system are free actors and have the freedom to have their economic and political relations of their own volition while treating other units as legal co-equals. US perceives that China does not regard these norms and considers itself exceptional. The derogation from the state sovereign principle has ancient antecedents and Chinese perception of heavenly mandate, Tianxiaism and the Sino-centric order. In imperial China (the reference is relevant in contemporary China as well as is evident from the incident narrated by Kissinger and cited above about Mao addressing his commanders in 1962) the pol-authority was the function of the ruler who could claim superlative virtue. No corrupt ruler (every ruler other than the Emperor fall in this category) had as much power or legitimacy or in other words there was no genuine co-equality of any other ruler. In the Sino- centric world order the world is perceived in gradation from civilized core to the barbarous periphery.

Some scholars on Chinese foreign policy argue that on its face China might seem to be a fervent supporter of the Westphalian system and upholds the principle of sovereignty where it suits China. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, using the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, China espoused the five Principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-

³⁹ He Yafei, "Arrival of the Post-American Era", *China-US Focus*, (August 21, 2017), <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/2017/0821/15374.html>.

⁴⁰ Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder", 648.

aggression, non-interference, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. With the historical memories of victimization of century of humiliation when China was subjected to Japanese and European imperialist depredations, the Chinese elite place strong emphasis upon the value system of sovereignty and noninterference. This system has served China in recovering their autonomy in the face of “unequal treaties”⁴¹ This value system supported China’s interests in engaging in global affairs on an equal footing and managing its internal affairs without external interference⁴². In a speech at the UN office in Geneva, President Xi emphasized upon this principal of sovereign co –equality by stating that all countries irrespective of their size and wealth are free to conduct their internal affairs without any interference and to choose their social system independently.⁴³

Since the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, non-interference or abstention from intervention has been enshrined as one of the cornerstones of China’s foreign policy principles. China upholds this principle with a tacit assumption of reciprocity, with concerns that the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the events in Hong Kong might be used as justification to undermine China’s sovereignty, promote regime change and invoke the “responsibility to protect”(R2P). Since 1950s, China ostensibly appears to strictly cling to this principle in its public statements and strategic messaging. However, as its global presence expands and demands active role in mediating the internal conflicts in the countries where Beijing interests are expanding such as those under BRI, it is difficult to retain the policy of non- interference and the “low profile” (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) strategy that Deng Xiaoping emphasized in 1990s. According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies, in 2018 Beijing was providing mediation in nine projects, as compared to three in 2012, a year before the launching of BRI. China’s current engagement in such projects spans Asia and Africa, in countries termed as BRI countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Iran, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.⁴⁴ Besides, domestic politics also play its role. There is growing pressure and expectations from the Chinese citizen about how their leadership proactively protects and promotes their investments and activities abroad and in this regard show willingness to demonstrate or use China’s economic and military power projection capabilities⁴⁵. In the past few years there is a surge in such expectations due

⁴¹ Christopher, “Xi Jinping, Michael Foucault”,p.13

⁴² Zhao, “A Revisionist Stakeholder”,p.645

⁴³ Wang Mingyang, “President Xi’s Speech at the UN Office at Geneva.” *CGTN*, (Jan 19, 2017), https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d516a4d786b544d/share_p.html.

⁴⁴ Jason Li, “Conflict Mediation with Chinese characteristics: How China Justifies its Non-Interference Policy. *Stimson Center*, no. 27 (Sep, 2019):1-2.

⁴⁵ Camilla T. N. Sørensen, ‘ “That is Not Intervention; That is Interference With Chinese Characteristics: New Concepts, Distinctions and Approaches Developing in the Chinese

to the incidents of kidnapping and murder of Chinese citizens working in countries like Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Nigeria. Finally, China can no longer free ride on the Washington's role as a global policemen guaranteeing international peace, stability and public goods given the US's isolationism under President Donald Trump's administration and retreat from the playing this role and all the hard work to the same degree. Consequently, all these drivers have led to an intense debate among Chinese international relations scholars about how Beijing can protect and promote Chinese global interests while at the same time adhering to the principle of non-intervention—how can Beijing legitimately intervene?

China squares this circle by framing a discourse to soften this engagement without harming its principle stand of non-interference by use of certain tactics/tools in the diplomatic rhetoric. Beijing's current foreign policy approach reflects a more flexible and pragmatic interpretation and implementation of the principle of non-interference. While non-intervention continues to be the trait of Chinese foreign policy, China proactively interferes in developments and conflicts in the countries where it has expanding interests. Sorensen highlights this framing in Chinese foreign policy by providing an example of the emphasis on the distinction between non-interference (*bu ganshe* 不干涉) and non- intervention (*bu ganyu* 不干预) in the Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox. Chinese international relations scholars and foreign and security policy circles have are using concepts like “creative involvement” (*chuangzaoxing jieru* 创造性介入), consultative intervention (*xieshang jieru* 协商介入), and “limited intervention” (*youxian ganyu* 有限干预) with limited means and goals in the conflict management⁴⁶. As the spirit of the principle of non- interference rests on respect of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, China maintains the non-interference by gaining the consent of the rightful sovereign body in the context it is interfering. The examples are its mediating role in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It operates by first beginning the dialogue with the government and then expanding to include opposition parties. Another way to claim non-interference by providing mediation limited in scope and purpose. Li argues that in this role China prefers conflict management to conflict resolution⁴⁷. For example, Beijing's good offices in the case of Afghanistan provided space for consultations between the combatants. China provided the meeting venue but stopped short of pressuring further negotiations or solutions.

Thus for China the interference for conflict management in the contexts where it has expanding interests relies on normative distinctions of ‘creative’ and

Debate and Foreign and Security Policy Practice”. *The China Quarterly*, no.239 (2019) : 1-20

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Li, “Conflict Mediation with Chinese characteristics,1-2

‘limited’ involvement and consultative intervention. Chinese leadership and IR scholars believe that this constructive and limited engagement is different from US style intervention and particularly the R2P to protect.

Conclusion

We can conclude that China being an exceptional power in the contemporary era is posing significant challenges to the world order, particularly in context of its interactions with the United States. Historically the discourse of exceptionalism has been dominated by the United States, where as China’s peaceful rise along with its unique identity reflecting its civilizational heritage and its global ambitions, has prompted a paradigm shift in the international system. This paper highlights the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of China’s identity as an exceptional power.

The perception of threat is increasing in the US, due to China’s peaceful rise and its contestation of the hegemony and reflects the broader anxieties surrounding the reconfiguration of global power structures. The discourse of exceptionalism will shape the future geopolitical landscape as both the states navigates complex and competitive relationship. This will eventually influence the future international relation’s trajectory and global security paradigm.

China's approach to international relations reflects a complex balancing act between upholding the principle of non-interference and adapting to the realities of its expanding global interests. While China has historically championed sovereignty and non-intervention, its growing global footprint, especially through initiatives like the Belt and Road project, has necessitated a more flexible interpretation of these principles. As China asserts itself more actively in global affairs, it seeks to frame its involvement in foreign conflicts as creative, consultative, and limited interventions, distinguishing these actions from traditional Western interventions. This pragmatic approach allows China to navigate the tension between respecting state sovereignty and protecting its strategic interests. Ultimately, as China continues to evolve as a global power, its foreign policy will likely remain a dynamic and nuanced blend of traditional values and new strategic imperatives.

References:

Allison, G. ‘The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for war?’
The Atlantic, September 24, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

- Buzan, B. China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(1), Spring 2010: 5–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pop014>.
- Callahan, W. "Chinese visions of self and other: the international politics of noses". *International Affairs* 99(5), 2023 :2079-2099, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad174>
- Callahan, W.A. *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Cheng. L.S. "Supplement & Revision of "Sino-Japanese Inter-Relations in Ming History" Taipei, 1981.
- Costigan, J.M. "China's Vision for World Order", *China File*, December 7, 2023. <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/chinas-vision-world-order>
- Ford, C.A. "Xi Jinping, Michael Foucault, and Spy Balloons? Communist China's Theory of Control and Visions of a Post-Westphalian World Order.", *Nat'l Sec. LJ* 11(1), 2023:1-54.
- Fukuyama, F. *The End of History and The Last Man*. Free Book Publishers, 1992.
- Markus, Hazel and Paula Nurius. "Possible Selves", *American Psychologist* 41(9), 1986: 954–969.
- Ho, B. "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China's Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness", *Alternatives* 39(3), 2014:164-176.
- Holsti, K. Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it exceptional?", *European Journal of International Relations* 17(3), September 2011: 381–404.
- Hjorth, R. "The Poverty of Exceptionalism in International Theory", *Journal of International Political Theory* 10(2), 2014:169–187.
- Jacques, M. *When China rules the world: The end of the western world and the birth of a new global order*. UK: Penguin, 2009.
- Kim, S. "Chinese Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice". In *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*, edited by Sameul Kim. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998: 3–33.
- Li, J. "Conflict Mediation with Chinese characteristics: How China Justifies its Non-Interference Policy. *Stimson Center*, no. 27, Sep, 2019:1-2.
- Maersheimer, J. China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105(690), April 2006:160–162.
- Mingyang, W. "President Xi's Speech at the UN Office at Geneva." *CGTN*, Jan 19, 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d516a4d786b544d/share_p.html.
- Minister of Foreign affairs, The People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference", https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdffyq/202204/t20220421_10671083.html

- Mushinda, B. , Lestari, Y. , Mbuku, J. , Shongo, T. , Badila, J. , Mutombo, S. , Nonga, M. , Wela, P. , Bafita, C. , Lohalo, G. and Mosali, P. “The Xi Jinping’s Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: Understanding in China-Africa Cooperation.” *Open Journal of Political Science*, no.13, 2023: 230-239. doi: [10.4236/ojps.2023.132014](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2023.132014).
- Schmitt, C. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. The MIT Press, 1998.
- Segal, G. “Does China Matter?”, *Foreign Affairs* 78(5), (Sep. - Oct 1999): 24-36.
- Shambaugh, D. “The Illusion of Chinese Power”, *The National Interest*, June 25, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-illusion-chinese-power-10739>.
- Schuman, M. “How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order”, *The Atlantic* July 13, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/07/china-xi-jinping-global-security-initiative/670504/>.
- Siraj, U. and Najimdeen Bakare, “Iran–USA Relations: From Exceptionalism to Containment Policy”, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9(1), 2022: pp. 99-121.
- Sørensen, C.T.N. “That is Not Intervention; That is Interference With Chinese Characteristics: New Concepts, Distinctions and Approaches Developing in the Chinese Debate and Foreign and Security Policy Practice. *The China Quarterly*, no.239, 2019 : 1-20
- Thimm, J. “American Exceptionalism—Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Evidence, *Paper für die Tagung der Nachwuchsgruppe “Internationale Politik”*, 13 (2007):14.
- Winthrop. J. “A Model of Christian Charity”. Sermon, December 31, 1630. From *Teaching American History*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/a-model-of-christian-charity-2/> (accessed October 20, 2024).
- Yafei, H. “Arrival of the Post-American Era’, *China-US Focus*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/2017/0821/15374.html>.
- Zhao, S. “A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order” , *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(113), 2018: 644, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458029.
- Zhang, F. “The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19(2), 2011:1–24.
- Zhang, R. “ Guoji geju bianhua yu zhongguo dingwei [Change of International System and China’s Positioning]”, *Xiandai guoji guanxi, Contemporary International Relations* 4. 2013: 20–22.