

THEME 01

# The philosophical foundations of China's future foreign policy

CHINA

FOREIGN POLICY

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

For many centuries, China considered itself the most developed and superior empire of the world, and followed a distinct foreign policy based on political philosophies that it developed. However, in the 19th and 20th century – the Chinese “century of humiliation” – its influence on international politics was marginalized. With the rise of the Chinese economy, the country will re-emerge as an important actor in geopolitics, and its foreign policy will be founded upon the political philosophy that it has developed in the course of its ancient history.

## Our observations

- We have written before about the strategic plans underlying China's domestic and foreign policy: its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI) and [Made in China 2025](#). Both plans have in common that they are long-term plans with horizons spanning several decades, that they have secured big commitments from China's top leadership, and are conceived as crucial for establishing China's role in the future world order.
- Considering China's economy accounts for almost a sixth of [global GDP](#) and almost one in five [people](#) in the world is Chinese, the country has a relatively small voting share in “Bretton Wood institutions”, such as the [IMF](#) (6.1%), [Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency](#) (2.6%), [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#) (4.5%), [International Finance Corporation](#) (2.3%), and [International Development Association](#) (2.2%). As a result, China has established several new multilateral investment and trading institutions, such as the Asian Investment and Development Bank and New Development Bank.
- We have written before about China's unique [philosophy](#) and [social ontology](#). They differ greatly from the West in, for example, their focus on the [collective](#) and long-term orientation, and a [practical and ethical](#) worldview (compared to a theoretical and epistemological one).
- Officially, [Marxism](#) is the foundation of the political philosophy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and underpins its political legitimacy, dubbed “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”. However, the CPC's constitution has always considered Marxism the first or “[primary stage of socialism](#)”, which implies a transitional phase to a higher or more superior form of China's political philosophy.
- Chinese philosophy's core consists of the “Three Teachings”: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, whose elements are still found in contemporary Chinese philosophy, folklore and traditions. Of these three, [Confucianism](#) is undergoing a revival in China, substantiating the importance of the Chinese state in the Confucian tradition that morally superior individuals must bring order and harmony to the state, and thereby to the rest of society. We have written that the critique of Chinese political philosophy on Western-style liberal [democracy](#) is that the latter can succumb to short-termism and selects incompetent leaders instead of capable and educated bureaucrats (so-called “[mandarins](#)”).



## Connecting the dots

After its opening up in 1978, China rose rapidly as an economic superpower. However, China's importance hasn't – yet – translated into internationally institutionalized power (as reflected in its disproportionately small voting shares or the minimal use of the [Renminbi](#)), an area that remains dominated by Western powers. However, after four decades, China is now shedding Deng Xiaoping's axiom of "[keeping a low profile](#)" in foreign policy. Given China's distinct worldview, culture and history, the country has distinct political philosophy, from which we can discern three main foundational principles of China's foreign policy:

The first is political legitimacy. Chinese emperors have always ruled because they had obtained the "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming*), which was illustrated in the emperor's ability to create a harmonious society in which all could flourish. When things went bad – because of a bad harvest or natural disasters – the Chinese people had the right to rebel and remove the government. Because of this pragmatic conception of political legitimacy, China has a long tradition of selecting the most virtuous and capable leaders. This happened by means of the imperial examination (*keju*) system, where candidates from all strata of society and from the whole empire were locked up for days to take exams. This meritocratic, but non-democratic foundation of Chinese leadership allows its leader the capacity to develop long-term vision and plans with a long execution horizon. Still, reaching the top rankings of the CPC requires a long career in the party and proven achievements in various parts of China. For example, many politicians in China's Politburo have university degrees and were chosen based on a wide range of credentials, tested in various regions of the Chinese country. This contrasts with the populist firebrands elected in India and the Philippines, a businessperson or bodybuilder-turned-actor-turned-politician elected in the U.S. and a sports player in Pakistan. It means political legitimacy is based on a strong state, which is highly hierarchical in form but also informally egalitarian. International institutions established by China might follow this Confucianist, meritocratic tradition.

A related idea is that countries and people are "all under

Heaven" (*tianxia*). According to Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang, the current world is still a "[non-world](#)", as there is still no vision on global politics that accounts for the whole world. Geopolitics still works from the perspective of the Westphalian nation-state, meaning that differences and conflict are stressed in international politics. Chinese emperors have always ruled from the idea that all nations and people could be included in the Chinese empire and its governance structure, no matter how different and barbaric they are. The idea is that the world puts all people and nations together and that all things co-exist with each other. From the perspective of competing nation-states, conflict and disagreement are almost a necessary outcome. As an example, Zhao names the United Nations, which fails to take the interest of the whole world into account, hence remains largely powerless in international issues (e.g. climate change, terrorism). Chinese philosophy and its focus on holistic approaches and its relational worldview might therefore lead to the establishment of institutions that work from a global perspective.

Third, because of the meritocratic, Confucian basis of China's political institutions, political trust in China is high, and the state has a strong presence in China's society and economy. The Mandate of Heaven is lost when the government loses the "hearts and mind of people" (*minxin xiangbei*): the state has the primary goal of bringing peace, prosperity and harmony. As a result, a kind of "regulatory capitalism" has emerged in China, in the name of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", in which the market is controlled by a strong and capable state. In this system, foreign intervention can only be justified when rulers mistreat their citizens, and when people protest against their rulers because their will is sovereign. Hence, states have a higher degree of sovereignty, as long as they bring harmony and include all under heaven in doing so. And by invoking the rhetoric of "scientific development" and the technological optimism of Marxism, China's government has put great faith in technology for solving its future challenges. This means that technological, pragmatic solutions might become more important in international institutions established by China.

## Implications

- For over a thousand years, China has had a fully formed imperial bureaucracy, assembled by means of competitive examination, which is allowed to regulate economic and social life. It is hard to imagine that China's government and policies would change every four years. Historically, regime change has brought chaos (to China), as we see now in many parts of the world (e.g. Congo, Afghanistan). China's empires have ruled based on this principle for centuries, hence the CCP could only be in the early stages of its ruling cycle.
- Countries will increasingly look East for inspiration how to organize their economies and governments. For example, the number of nations in which the U.S. holds a competitive advantage in [favorability](#) over China has halved, from 25 to 12. Whereas the U.S. once had a 12-point lead over China in terms of a global median, that lead has shrunk to 2 points in 2017. Furthermore, Xi Jinping is now more popular than Trump worldwide. The "[China model](#)" as a development model is becoming increasingly popular, and even more popular than the American model in several African countries. However, fears about absolutism and totalitarianism will hinder swift adoption of China's political philosophy.