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SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHINESE IMAGE OF THE WORLD ORDER: TRANSCENDING GREAT WALL THROUGH NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND TIANXIA SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Relative decline of the United States, rise of the rest, challenges posed by the non-state actors, proliferating violent crises in different regions, unstoppable environmental degradation, and the unabated growth of the populist tendencies are few of the issues transpiring at the system level. This paper tries to dissect this transformation, while also highlighting that how and why is China trying and willing to take on the leading role in the regional and international milieu. How does China view the world and what is the Chines image of the world order? The study elaborates Neo-Confucianism and Tianxia (All under Heaven) systems in order to enlarge upon the Chinese view of the world.

Keywords: *Tianxia, Neo-Confucianism, Liberal world order, Great power politics, Systemic transformations*

INTRODUCTION

Every great power in the recorded history has tried to not only protect but also expand its specific sphere of influence (Weitz, 2017), which often has resulted in a clash of the interests resulting into onset of violence and hostilities (Dunn & Bobick, 2014; Hast, 2016). In so doing, every great power has set its needs and desires around survival, security, dominance, and continuity. Another important objective of

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the great powers remained to make the world – or at least areas under their influence – in their 'image'. In the academic jargons of international relations, this image often denotes a world order, In order to ensure its security, great powers try to preserve the status quo – when they have already achieved a dominant position – and to challenge the status quo when some other great power is in the preponderant position (Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus, maintaining peace – though a difficult job – is fundamental to the whole process of expanding one's world order. It requires will, capacity, and ability to maintain peace and perpetuate a system. This is generally what any dominant power must do to stay in the game of international politics and influence the world at large (Schweller, 1996). However, this material process is just not possible without effective propagation of the ideas.

Ideas have always played a central role in determining the contours of the international system. Chinese spectacular rise in the last two decades is not only limited in the material sphere. The modern China has progressed in terms of intellectual and civilizational dimensions. The newfound search for Chinese place in the world, and its related identity has proven to be an important impetus for the search of a Chinese model of the world. This process has important implication for the world. Here, it is important to stress that China does not need to be an absolute super-power to exert its influence over the region or in the world. China's overwhelming power and influence is easily noticeable even today in almost every domain of the international relations.

Similarly, ideas played a paramount role in the realization of American rise since its war of independence. General public may consider that the United States achieved the superpower status because of its material power. But that is not entirely true. Material power mostly succeed when its application or expansion is backed by the ideational forces (Etzioni, 2007). Ideas like democracy, sovereign equality, freedom, and liberal economy are pertinent while analysing

American rise to the great power status. American material capacity was supported by its ideas about world and the role it must play to mend the devious world. The idea of a modified manifest destiny, which considers that: Americans and their institutions are special; it is their duty to spread third institutions in other parts of the world; and it is their destiny to fulfil this duty, and they cannot avoid it (Merk & Merk, 1995). The American ideas and institutions were instrumental in defining the contours of the post-Second World War world.

These and several other normative and ideational structures not only shape actor's identity but also influence its interests (Barnett, 2017). But the perpetuation of any power dominance depends on the appeal and success of these structures. Rise of China in the international arena has induced a lot of speculations, analyses, and research with the purpose of predicting that what the world would be like if China ever comes to dominate it (Christensen, 2006).

The importance of Chinese view directly flows from subsequent development of Chinese power, the international clout, and important role in the management of the international system that it enjoys today. Not to ignore its initiatives concerning regional connectivity i.e. to develop road and rail transit networks but also its increasing focus on chain of ports that connect maritime routes – commonly known as 'String of Pearls' (Beeson, 2018; Chan, 2017). This complex system is supplanted by China's search for energy especially concerning the pipelines developed or developing with neighbouring Central Asian republics. Apart from these significant developments, China is investing immensely in the renewable energy, which is considered as the biggest source of the future world's energy requirement.

Most of the existing studies have focused Chinese material power, compared it with other powers, especially the United States. However, such studies although do take notice of Chinese past and history, but very recently new scholarship has started taking shape

which has given importance to the Chinese view about the world. Pertinent questions here to ask are: How does China view the world and why do Chinese views about world are important for the rest of the world? These questions naturally lead researchers to have an understanding about the contemporary international system and world order, especially the Chinese ideas about the nature of the world order. In order to answer the questions raised above, this study is organised into several sections dealing with the conceptual understanding of the world order, the nature of the contemporary world order and how is it challenged or collaborated by the views of the Rising Rest. The study then elaborates in detail the Chinese view of the world especially its system of 'All under Heaven', Tianxia.

CONCEPTUALISING WORLD ORDER

The term world order is often intermixed with the conceptions of the similar terms such as international order, international society, and international system. Bull (2012) notes that the international order is a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society' (p. 8). While he considers that:

> A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (Bull, 2012, p. 13).

He further considers that 'a system of states (international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole' (Bull, 2012, p. 9). On the Other hand, Raymond Aron defined international system as 'the independent political communities in question

maintain regular relations with each other' and 'are all capable of being implicated in a generalised war' (Bull, 2012, p. 10).

Construction of the world as we know it today and the behaviour of the states are processes, which are reciprocal in nature. The happenings of world significantly affect behaviours and even the nature of the states. These states in turn do contribute to the construction of the world as a whole. In this study it has been tried to reconsider the working of the world; the role of power and ideas, and how the complex synthesis of power and ideas contribute to the outlook of the world.

The purpose of a world order is to maintain peace, and in some ways to regulate the social life and justice between the states. The effectiveness of any order can be calculated from effectiveness and efficiency of its founding principles. The European order that followed Napoleonic wars came to end when it failed to guarantee balance of power, and when its principles were scrapped (Agensky, 2017; Dent, 2020).

Since World War- II the United States enjoyed a preponderant position in almost every sphere of the international system; from international decision-making, power projection at the system level, a robust economy, even in the domains of the opinion making and a dominant culture. The rise of a preponderant US gave substance to the coming of a global liberal democratic order (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018), where America felt confident to embark on its quest for universal democratization.

Any keen observer of global politics can observe that contemporary world is much different than that of previous century. It is common, somewhat prevalent, fallacy to predict the world based on the analysis of so-called superpowers. Another erroneous analysis is the prediction ascribing to the coming multipolarity. The assumption based on traditional view of international relations. Where since the development of discipline there has always been dominant power,

significantly contributing to the International system and society.

Conceptualizing contemporary world order and rise of the rest

In the post-Cold War era, it was the liberal democratic order with the US at its helm, which many scholars termed as the unipolar world (Krauthammer, 1990). Twenty-first century saw the universality of liberal economic system, supported by the US and conveniently known as capitalism.

At the turn of century, the sustenance of the US position was significantly challenged by the rising demands of other emerging powers—specifically in the economic sense—for recognition of their status. The economic crisis of 2007-08 dealt a tangible blow to the US position in the international system. US inability to appear as a consequential actor in some conflicts such as Syria, Yemen, its uncoordinated initial effort in Libya, its moving away from its allies and commitments – specifically during Trump administration (Baker & Swanson, 2018) – all indicate the strategic rebalancing of the world. Trump leadership has vividly demonstrated this theme of world politics, wherein the US is in a relative decline. Trump is not the start but the culmination of the long process, whose election not only indicated isolationist impulse, but also shattered confidence of most of the Americans in their ability to sustain predominant role.

As far the US allies are concerned, they are being tested. The institutional frameworks or agreements that formed the foundation of Western alliances are being unilaterally trashed by the US. This has been seen by some as decline in American supremacy. Still, the discussion around this topic cannot be reduced to United States. These implications are not only restricted to political and military dimension, but they have the potential to affect the normative structures of the world. Rise in global discontent, search for alternative system, rising extremism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism are all indicators of realization that liberal democracy is not the solution to the problems faced by the world. The much cheered

unipolar moment is over. It is not to say that equality has been established, but the idea of hegemon stabilizing the world is becoming unattractive, even it seems to have lost the legitimizing thrust (Acharya & Buzan, 2019).

This downward curve in the capability of US in specific and west in general was accompanied by unambiguous increase in wealth and power of non-western powers, conveniently known as 'the rest' (Bisley, 2010; Zakaria, 2008). Power seems to move away from central control, and is distributed through most of the world. Various scholars have speculated the coming of the multipolarity, where it is clearly visible that significant increase in power and wealth of states such as China, India, Brazil Russia, and Japan, warrants a comprehensive view of the world that might be on the horizon. Scholars have termed this system as deeply pluralistic in nature, where there is not only the diffusion of wealth and power, but also cultural authority (Buzan & Lawson, 2015).

Another stark realization the world face today is the enormous rise in power and international clout of China Chinese authoritarian system and even more its model of development, with significant pull, stand in contrast to the Western system and cannot be ignored. It has curiously mixed the market economy with authoritarian political system led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The rising suspicion about China's phenomenal development and rise in power is not without substance. The quantitative study of Chinese economy shows a visible rise and Chinese growth since 1979 on average is estimated to be 9.5 per cent (Morrison, 2014). This trend in Chinese economic rise is followed by growing Chinese political activism, epitomizes by enterprises such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) along with technological advancements especially in the military sector.

The rise in Chinese power has important implications for the world as its authority is not only limited to the material domain, but also has important ideational underpinnings, which view the world quite differently.

Chinese 'Image' of the World

It has been established that the power, authority, and wealth is distributed in today's world, where China has turned out to be a significant actor. The Chinese power and influence has increased internationally because of its huge economic potential and military might. Its unique history of long civilization and organized institutions furthered its appeal in the academic circles. China's conception of itself as morally superior for it rarely had imperial ambitions. Its historic role is seen by some as stabilizer of the region and epicentre of art and literature. Its geography and huge population, which comprised of 90 per cent Han Chinese, - provided China the strength to manage and manipulate a single large group.

Historical overview of the Chinese State and Society

China has a long history of a centrist empire, playing a dominant role in its periphery. This historical domination of China over its periphery is known as a 'Suzerain-state system' (Shiming, 2006). The practical hegemonic status of ancient China to the neighbouring states tended to develop the cultural, psychological, and political concept of 'the middle kingdom', ruled by the divine mandate i.e. God king (Hacker, 2012). This view of Chinese-self came to a stark realization after the dominance of European powers over China. China was never colonized in a formal sense, but it faced the impact—disastrous in its manifestation—of imperialism.

External fragility of China was followed by internal Chaos. Ensuing domestic tensions left it more vulnerable. China was united—after a bloody civil war—under the leadership of Communist party being led by Mao (Benton, 2007). China entered the international Arena with strong sense of betrayal on the part of the Western states. It was led into war with US over Korea (Jun, 2010). It was not long when China refused to accept Soviet predominance and embarked on a campaign to promote its own interest in the international arena. This led China to play an independent role, challenging and at times

collaborating with both superpowers (Westad, 2012).

China tested its nuclear device in 1964. Mao's ambitious plans such as 'great leap forward' and 'cultural revolution' did China more harm than good (Su, 2011). However, Deng's policy of 'reform and opening' took China away from controlled economy to market economy, which came to be known as liberal economy with Chinese Characteristic. China has made significant move from poverty ridden backward economy to that of modern economic system. This enormous growth has led CCP to a more dominant position within China, which has turned to embrace ancient Chinese traditions and culture—rejected by Mao—even Confucianism is being revived in China (Swain, 2017). The construction of Confucius institutes, the emphasis of family values and allegiance to state show a quest for rediscovery of Confucius teachings (Swain, 2017). Rising China is increasingly being viewed as a challenge by West, especially by the US (Christensen, 2006). The appeal of its model of growth and development has already started to attract developing states and has emerged as an enigma for the western world.

Chinese worldview: Neo-Confucianism

Chinese sense of unique civilization, its cultural dominance, and history of political supremacy has provided it with distinctive view of world. Even during the era of relative weakness, it has tried to maintain a distinct position. This quest of unique—somewhat ethical and moral—identity springs from China's consciousness about its past civilization and culture.

Chinese world view or Chinese world order centred on domination by China, a system somewhat similar to benign hegemony, without any major thought of sovereign or territorially bounded nation-states. It offered a hierarchical system based on the superiority, which was embedded in traditions of morals and ethics. Concept of order in China was constructed around the narrative of benevolence: for the protection and benefits for its followers, and promotion of peace

(Zhao, 2015). It has been defined as a 'Kingly way' based on the notion of righteousness and benevolence as opposed to western ideas of democracy and equality (Zhang, 2010).

In the recent years Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has revived the Confucian traditions and views about – who emphasized the ethical behaviour on behalf of both – state and society. State is required to deter unethical behaviour. In the Confucian tradition, family formed the most significant unit of a society, thus only an ethical society can produce ethical ruler. This according to Confucian thought is in the benefit of all (Swain, 2017). The revival of Confucian thought has started a debate in China about possible Chinese world view which oscillates between Radical Confucianism, which wants to take Chinese society to its ancient roots, and the Neo-Confucianism, according of which Chinese Culture has all elements of modernity. Thus, it need noting to import from outside.

Chinese all under heaven system — The Tianxia system

Zhao Tingyang modernised and updated the idea of Tianxia or 'All under heavens,' system, which has attracted wide attraction in Chinese society and world at large. China's power and authority worldwide has given rise to a lot of speculations about nature and conduct of foreign policy. Though official line of Chinese authority is extremely vague regarding this system yet the academic work of Zhao Tingyang has resulted in a renaissance of this concept (Zhao, 2019). He has traced the concept of Tianxia from the ancient Zhou dynasty. It is based on the politics based upon the idea of universally accepted system and political institutions, which benefit all nations. It brings harmony between all the nations and develops a culture of living peacefully under the heaven (Zhao, 2019). The epic success of Zhou dynasty over much larger Shang dynasty is ascribed to this system.

Zhao notes that the world today is not facing the problem of 'failed states' but that of the 'failed world'. He rejects the Western idea of

'internationality' which has failed to ensure cooperation (Zhao, 2006). This state of affairs can be changed by focusing on 'worldness' provided by Chinese philosophy of world politics. The solution of problem is sought in the creation of world institutions representing the interests of all nations instead to being the tool of domination for the few (Zhao, 2018, 2019).

Tianxia system envisioned to provide a philosophical basis for the world institutions. The western system of analysis impedes the thinking about world institutions by being inherently restricted to nation states as the highest form of analysis. According to the Tianxia system, the world ought to be the starting point for political thinking, and not the state as provided by Western thought. Thus, the western viewpoint is incomplete as it stops at nation-states. Tianxia is based on the hierarchy of the world, states, and families. Here it is not individual that is considered as the foundation of society, but it is the family. This family signals the harmonious relationship between members as opposed to self-interested individuals (Zhao, 2006, 2009; Zhang, 2010). The concept of world has three broad meaning here:

- The Earth or all land under sky;
- Establishment of universal agreement; a common choice beneficial to all; and
- Development of global institution for global order

Chinese philosophical tradition thinks of the world as a political entity, opposed to western thought which think of it as a scientific object. For Chinese philosophical thought relation among things define their meaning, for Western philosophy it is essence of things that define the meaning. Keeping aligned to this philosophical tradition world is formed by relations between physical world, psychological world, and world of international institutions.

The cardinal principle of Tianxia is inclusion of all, and exclusion of no one (Zhao, 2018). Nothing is regarded as foreign or pagan; binary of 'self and other' does not exist. From this principle, it is inferred that

internal peace and order cannot be guaranteed in condition of external chaos and disorder. For this purpose, it is important to achieve the 'world for all people', where there is no foreign or alien. Thus, Tianxia imagines a system without hegemony. This world is characterized by harmony and cooperation – while harmony of diversity is stressed (Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2009).

For harmony to develop, the best way is to create a consensus. And to achieve this consensus and form a harmonious relation, two strategies are identified which depend on the maximization of common good. Zhao has termed them as 'Confucian equilibrium' and 'Confucian improvement'. Concept of Confucian equilibrium is based on development of harmonious equilibrium where the interest of two actors are aligned in the way an actor A benefit if actor B benefit, A stands to lose if B loose. Confucian improvement is based on the premise of mutual achievement, for example, the promotion of B's objective becomes A strategy to achieve its own objective (Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Some scholars consider that in the twenty-first a new cold war has started, while others have considered that this is an era of multipolarity (Allison, 2015, 2017; Moore, 2017). Both of these positions have gained currency not only in the academic domain but also in the policy circles. This study observed that power is no more centralized in the international system. So an effort to understand the world in traditional sense of great power competition may not be the right approach here. There exist a lot of actors other than states or great powers who have the potential and will to change the patterns of interaction in the world.

Moreover, the West is no more a predominant region, calling shots for the entire world. The world is witnessing the rise of regional powers, asserting their right to have a predominant position at least

on the regional levels. Rise of such regional powers is significant for the future analysis of international relations. However, among these rising powers, China seems to be the most consequential with its model of growth, its outreach to the world, its growing influence on the neighbouring regions and beyond.

Various factors point to the direction of a world where China is set to play a dominant role. Thus, it becomes ever more important to have any rudimentary idea about how China views the world? Most significant of Chinese idea about the world, if nationalist and orientalist impulses are to be ignored, is the Tianxia System. Tianxia or 'All under Heaven' is an ancient concept modernized by Tingyang. The idea itself has important recommendation for what Tingyang call 'failed world' based on erroneous analysis of nation-states as providing the foundational form of analysis. Such a western system, according to Zhao, ultimately hinders the prospects of world institutions. It also suits with official contention about the peaceful rise of China, whereby no binary of self and other is being drawn. It is true and significant to acknowledge that Tianxia is a concept yet to be tested. However, it still can perform the function of providing ideational basis to Chinese power.

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