

***Tianxia* under Xi Jinping: Is China a revisionist or reformist power of the Liberal International Order?**

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Since the global financial crisis in 2008/2009, China's foreign policy behaviour has been pivoting from Deng Xiaoping's low-profile strategy, the 'hide and bide', towards greater assertiveness. Under Xi Jinping, China's top leader since 2012, the assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy has moved up a gear, under the brand name of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'.

In early June, a Chinese navy ship cut sharply across its American counterpart to force the latter to change course or risk collision. Chinese military aircrafts have repeatedly flown into Taiwan's air defence zone in large numbers.

Chinese military bases are spotted in the Paracels and the Spratly Islands, flouting the Hague's 2016 ruling against its expansive claims in the South China Sea. Chinese forces clashed with Indian forces in 2022, after deadly border combats in 2020. Beijing expelled American journalists in 2021 and recently, Indian journalists, to retaliate against Washington's and Delhi's expulsion of Chinese journalists.

The 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' of Chinese diplomats, the use of economic coercion to punish countries that have offended China, and the tacit support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine count as other examples of Chinese assertiveness that make many countries deeply uneasy. They have led many to see China as a revisionist power concerning the 'liberal international order', the world order constructed under western leadership after the Second World War.

Xi Jinping shunned the concept 'liberal international order'. He criticised the US-led security alliance system that underpins the order as harbouring a 'cold war mentality' that has no place in today's world. He vilifies democratic values as a western conspiracy against the global south.

However, he [pledged support](#) for 'the international system with the United Nations at its core'. Under Xi, China becomes the second largest contributor to the peacekeeping and regular budgets of the United Nations.

Xi is a vocal supporter of economic globalization, free trade and the development of the global south. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, led by China and triple-A rated, is internationally respected for its high-standard governance structure and its effectiveness as a financial institution. China is a party to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a mega free-trade deal involving 15 countries in the Asia Pacific. In 2021 China applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), notwithstanding its American origin and significant Japanese influence.

Beijing's cooperative gestures have led some to conclude that China wants to continue to participate in and benefit from the liberal international order. This notwithstanding, it is also acknowledged that China wants to 'reform' the order, for example, by making authoritarian

political regimes acceptable and increasing its voting share in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), so that the liberal international order can work better for China.

Is China a revisionist or reformist power in relation to the liberal international order? Is this a matter with which equally valid conclusions can be reached depending on what evidence is used? To shed light on this debate, it is useful to take Xi Jinping's overt fondness of the ancient Sino-centric order, *tianxia* (literally 'all under heaven'), as the starting point for analysis.

On many occasions Xi equates *tianxia* to a '[common destiny for humankind](#)', his ideal vision of international relations, which is mistranslated by official sources into English as a '[community of shared future for humankind](#)', although the word 'community' is not in the original Chinese.

Tianxia is a hierarchical world order, where China, the top 'civilization power', is above other countries. Xi's vision of *tianxia* suggests that it is unrivalled Chinese power and universal acceptance of Chinese influence that sustain world peace and prosperity.

Xi conceives of economic globalisation and international institutions, especially the United Nations, as instruments for advancing *tianxia*, not as instruments of the liberal international order, hence Beijing invests in making them more reflective of China's interests.

Building *tianxia* in today's world means ensuring that the world order advances China's interests and values, as Xi understands them to be. It requires other countries to show respect to China and stays far away from contesting what Xi sees as China's core interests.

It sees the economic development of China as the main way with which it contributes to global public goods provision. It establishes loose partnerships with like-minded countries to give China maximum room to manoeuvre, unlike the US-led security alliances, which Xi views as a liability.

It asks all countries to mind their own affairs and to resolve differences by consultation. But where this does not happen and conflicts ensue, it does not prescribe a clear or active Chinese role for mediation.

Although Xi's *tianxia* vision is a world order, it is not so much about the world as it is about China. It is not about defending a set of values or holding countries accountable to rules and norms because this would constrain Chinese actions.

Since China does not intend to take up global leadership in the way the US does, the *tianxia* order is not a substitution of the liberal international order in real terms.

It is certainly incompatible with the liberal international order in the sense that uncontested Chinese supremacy cannot be established without humbling the US.

Xi sees China, the centre of *tianxia*, to be compassionate and incapable of aggression. This follows that what is widely viewed as assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour and rhetoric are nothing but principled defence of China's 'legitimate rights' and 'core interests'.

China is in no mood of making concession unless the other party to the conflict is willing to significantly yield to Beijing's demands.

The interest-based as opposed to rules-based or value-based nature of *tianxia* suggests a degree of tolerance of disorder as long as Xi thinks it would not backfire on China's interests.