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## Research Paper

## China's Foreign Policy Transformation: Assessing Chinese Characteristics from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping

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### ABSTRACT

China's transformation from an isolated socialist state into an emerging world power has been directly linked to in its foreign policy strategy. This article attempts to the shift in Chinese foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping's era of strategic restraint to Xi Jinping's pursuit of proactive geo-economic statecraft. Using the frameworks of Neoclassical Realism, Geoeconomics, Economic Statecraft, and Constructivism, the study argues that China's foreign policy transformation reflects the interaction between rising material capabilities, changing global power structures, and the pursuit of national rejuvenation. While Deng's *taoguang yanghui* strategy emphasised economic modernisation, stability, and global integration, subsequent leaders expanded China's international engagement through multilateralism and peaceful development. Under Xi Jinping, initiatives such as the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), AIIB, and NDB" demonstrate the growing role of economic instruments in advancing strategic interests. The article argues that Xi's foreign policy represents an adaptive evolution rather than a complete departure from Deng's vision, marking China's transition from a reactive actor to an active shaper of global governance and international order

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### Deng Xiaoping and the Strategic Reorientation of Chinese Foreign Policy

Aftermath the Mao Zedong's demise in 1976, China moved into a transformative phase under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, whose reform agenda fundamentally redefined the country's domestic development trajectory and external engagement. Rather than abandoning socialism, Deng introduced a pragmatic model that reconciled market-oriented economic reforms with the continued political monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This recalibration represented not an ideological rupture but a strategic adaptation designed to accelerate modernisation while preserving regime legitimacy. Consequently, China's foreign policy slowly shifted from

revolutionary internationalism toward a development-oriented diplomacy that prioritised economic growth, technological modernisation, and international stability. [1]

Deng's diplomatic vision remained firmly anchored in the wider objective of restoring China's historical status as a major power, an aspiration that had also informed Maoist foreign policy. However, unlike his predecessor, Deng considered economic development the primary instrument through which national rejuvenation could be achieved. Accordingly, Beijing progressively reduced its ideological support for revolutionary movements abroad and curtailed extensive political and military assistance to developing countries. This strategic adjustment enabled China to cultivate constructive relations with advanced

industrial economies while minimising unnecessary geopolitical confrontations. [2] During the late Cold War period, Deng pursued an independent foreign policy characterised by strategic flexibility, allowing Beijing to maintain productive relations with both superpowers without becoming subordinate to either bloc.

One of the defining characteristics of Deng's foreign policy was the close integration of domestic modernisation with external diplomacy. Chinese leaders increasingly perceived foreign relations as an extension of national development strategy rather than merely a security instrument. This perspective reflected the longstanding Chinese political tradition that domestic stability and international engagement are mutually reinforcing components of statecraft. Consequently, economic modernisation became inseparable from diplomatic decision-making, with foreign policy serving the broader objective of enhancing China's comprehensive national power.

Equally significant was Deng's commitment to preserving China's cultural and ideological identity while embracing selected aspects of globalisation. Rather than advocating wholesale Westernisation, he emphasised the selective absorption of foreign knowledge, technology, and capital within a distinctly Chinese political framework. This approach was institutionalised through the doctrine of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," which legitimised market reforms without abandoning socialist governance. [3] The formulation enabled Beijing to reconcile economic liberalisation with political continuity, thereby avoiding the systemic instability experienced by several socialist states during the final decades of the Cold War.

Deng's pragmatic leadership style further distinguished his approach from the ideological rigidity of the Maoist era. Rejecting doctrinal orthodoxy, he famously argued that policy effectiveness should be judged by practical outcomes rather than ideological conformity. This philosophy, often encapsulated in the principle of "seeking truth from facts," became the intellectual foundation of China's reform programme. Instead of initiating an extensive de-Maoization campaign, Deng carefully preserved the symbolic legitimacy of Mao while simultaneously introducing far-reaching institutional reforms. Such political caution ensured elite cohesion within the CCP and facilitated the gradual implementation of transformative economic policies.

The reform agenda was operationalised through the Open Door Policy, which fundamentally altered China's engagement with the global economy. The collective decision-making in policies, creation of "Special Economic Zones (SEZs), promoting the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)" and promotion of technology transfer collectively transformed China into an increasingly attractive destination for international capital. [4] These initiatives not only accelerated industrialisation but also integrated China into global production networks, laying the foundations for its subsequent emergence as the world's manufacturing hub.

Parallel to domestic reforms, Deng pursued a carefully calibrated diplomatic strategy aimed at normalising relations with major powers. Improved ties with the United States, Japan, Western

Europe, and eventually the Soviet Union provided China with access to advanced technology, international markets, foreign investment, and educational exchanges that significantly enhanced national modernisation. This diplomatic normalisation reflected Deng's conviction that external cooperation constituted an essential prerequisite for domestic economic transformation rather than an ideological concession to the West.

Deng also demonstrated remarkable political innovation through the formulation of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Conceived initially to facilitate national reunification, the model proposed the coexistence of socialist governance on the mainland with capitalist systems in Hong Kong, Macau, and potentially Taiwan. While reaffirming the indivisibility of Chinese sovereignty under the One China principle, the framework simultaneously conveyed flexibility in institutional arrangements, [5] thereby enhancing China's diplomatic credibility and expanding its options for peaceful reunification.

### Xi's China Dream

The defining intellectual foundation of Xi Jinping's foreign policy emerged shortly after his assumption of the Chinese Communist Party's leadership in 2012. During his visit to the exhibition *The Road to Rejuvenation* at the National Museum of China, Xi situated China's contemporary development within a broader historical narrative extending from the Opium Wars to the country's economic resurgence following the reform era. By invoking the collective memory of the Century of Humiliation, Xi argued that national rejuvenation constituted the central historical mission of modern China. This vision was subsequently articulated through the concept of the China Dream (Zhongguo Meng), which has since become the overarching ideological framework guiding both domestic governance and foreign policy.

Unlike earlier leadership slogans that primarily emphasised economic development or social harmony, the China Dream integrates economic modernisation, technological innovation, military transformation, political stability, and international influence into a single strategic objective. At its core lies the aspiration to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation", reviving China's historical status as a prosperous, technologically advanced, and globally influential nation. [6] Rather than presenting national development as an end in itself, Xi conceptualises modernisation as the principal instrument through which China can reshape its international position and exercise greater influence within global governance.

The China Dream is operationalised through a long-term strategic roadmap commonly associated with the Two Centenary Goals. The first objective focuses on completing socialist modernisation and building a moderately prosperous society through sustained economic growth, technological advancement, and improvements in living standards. The second extends beyond domestic transformation by envisioning China as a fully modern socialist power possessing world-leading economic capabilities, advanced military strength, technological competitiveness, and substantial influence over international affairs by the centenary of the People's Republic in 2049. These

developmental milestones demonstrate that Xi's foreign policy is embedded within a comprehensive grand strategy linking domestic modernisation with international power projection.

A notable feature of Xi's discourse is the reinterpretation of wealth (fu) and strength (qiang) as mutually reinforcing components of national power. Economic development is no longer viewed solely as a prerequisite for domestic prosperity; instead, it serves as the material foundation for diplomatic influence, technological leadership, military modernisation, and institutional authority. This understanding reflects the contemporary Chinese emphasis on comprehensive national power (zonghe guoli), in which economic capability, scientific innovation, political stability, military capacity, and international legitimacy collectively determine a state's strategic position. Consequently, foreign policy has become increasingly integrated with national development planning, industrial policy, and technological self-reliance. [7]

Xi further expanded this strategic vision during the Nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017. In contrast to earlier formulations that focused primarily on overcoming historical weakness, Xi argued that China had entered a new historical stage in which it was "moving closer to the centre of the world stage." He interpreted China's modern political evolution as progressing through three successive phases: Mao Zedong's achievement of national independence, Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reform and prosperity, and Xi Jinping's own responsibility to transform China into a strong and influential global power. This historical sequencing constructs continuity within the CCP's political narrative while simultaneously legitimising a more ambitious and proactive foreign policy.

Perhaps the most significant conceptual innovation of Xi's diplomacy is the doctrine of a "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind (Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti)". Although earlier Chinese leaders had promoted ideas such as a *harmonious world* and mutually beneficial cooperation, Xi elevated the notion of a shared future into the central normative principle of Chinese foreign policy. Officially, the concept advocates sovereign equality, inclusive globalisation, mutual respect, sustainable development, and win-win cooperation among states. [8] From Beijing's perspective, it reflects an effort to democratise global governance by increasing the representation and influence of developing countries within international institutions.

At the same time, this concept represents a significant evolution in China's approach to international order. Whereas Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy emphasised strategic restraint and adaptation to the existing international system, Xi's doctrine suggests that China should actively participate in shaping global norms, institutions, and governance mechanisms. This transformation is evident in Beijing's growing role in development finance, climate diplomacy, digital governance, infrastructure connectivity, and multilateral institution-building. Initiatives such as the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)", the "New Development Bank (NDB)", and more recent proposals including the "Global Development Initiative (GDI)", "Global

Security Initiative (GSI)", and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)" collectively demonstrate China's increasing willingness to provide international public goods while simultaneously expanding its strategic influence. [9]

The scholarly interpretation of these developments is discussed scholastically. Realist scholars generally articulate that China's evolving behaviour reflects the natural consequences of a redistribution of material capabilities within the international system, whereby rising powers seek greater influence over regional and global institutions. Constructivist perspectives emphasise the importance of historical memory, national identity, and civilizational narratives in shaping China's diplomatic preferences, particularly the centrality of national rejuvenation and historical justice. By contrast, scholars of geoeconomics interpret Xi's foreign policy as an advanced form of economic statecraft in which trade, investment, infrastructure finance, technology, and development cooperation function as instruments for achieving long-term geopolitical objectives. These theoretical perspectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, together they illustrate the multidimensional character of China's contemporary foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Xi's increasingly proactive diplomacy has generated divergent international responses. Chinese policymakers consistently maintain that their initiatives are intended to promote shared development, multipolarity, and reform of global governance institutions in different method reflect the interests of emerging economies. Many Western scholars and policymakers, however, argue that China's proliferating economic and institutional influence is accompanied by greater strategic competition, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where issues relating to Taiwan, the South China Sea, technology, and maritime security have intensified geopolitical tensions. Consequently, Xi's foreign policy has become a focal point of broader debates concerning the future channelising of power and the evolution of the international order. [10]

From a broader historical perspective, Xi Jinping's foreign policy should be understood not as a rejection of Deng Xiaoping's strategic principles but as their adaptation to China's transformed material capabilities. Deng's diplomacy sought to create favourable international conditions for economic development; Xi's diplomacy seeks to leverage the economic strength accumulated during four decades of reform to proliferate the sphere of influence over regional and global governance. The transition from "keeping a low profile" (taoguang yanghui) to "striving for achievement" (fenfa youwei) therefore reflects a recalibration of strategy rather than an abandonment of China's long-standing emphasis on national rejuvenation, strategic autonomy, and comprehensive national power.

### Xi's Grand Strategy: BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represent one of the most ambitious and consequential foreign policy initiatives advanced by China in the twenty-first century. Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the BRI during his visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, which marked a significant reorientation of

China's external engagement by proposing an expansive framework for regional connectivity, economic integration, and global governance. While the BRI is frequently presented as a contemporary development strategy, its intellectual and symbolic foundations are deeply embedded in the historical roots of the Silk Road, which for centuries facilitated commercial exchange, cultural interaction, and diplomatic engagement across Eurasia.

In his address at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013, Xi Jinping invoked the historical missions of the Han Dynasty envoy Zhang Qian, portraying them as the origin of the overland Silk Road that connected China with Central Asia and, ultimately, Europe. By drawing upon this historical narrative, Xi framed the BRI as a revival of a long-standing tradition of peaceful cooperation rather than as a purely economic or geopolitical project. He further argued that the historical Silk Road exemplified principles of mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, cultural exchange, and shared prosperity, demonstrating that states with diverse political systems, religions, and cultural traditions could coexist through sustained cooperation. [11]

These historical references are perceived as rhetorical devices but as tools of strategic legitimization, providing the BRI with civilisational continuity and normative appeal. Beyond its historical symbolism, the BRI reflects China's broader vision for reshaping international cooperation in response to evolving global political and economic challenges. The initiative seeks to “promote infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges” while simultaneously advancing a more inclusive model of multilateral engagement. As China's global influence has expanded, Beijing has increasingly positioned itself as an advocate of alternative approaches to international development and global governance. We must note that this framework, the BRI, functions as a geoeconomic tool that China envisioned to stimulate economic growth, address deficiencies in global connectivity, mitigate regional instability, and encourage cooperative responses to emerging transnational challenges. Consequently, the initiative embodies not only China's developmental ambitions but also its aspiration to produce a more interconnected and multipolar international order founded on principles of “mutual benefit and shared development.” [12]

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is propelled by set of domestic economic imperatives and broader strategic objectives that extend beyond infrastructure development. At the domestic level, the initiative seeks to generate new export markets, encourage outward foreign direct investment, absorb excess industrial capacity, stimulate the development of China's inland provinces, and facilitate the internationalisation of the Renminbi (RMB). Simultaneously, the BRI complements Beijing's neighbourhood diplomacy by strengthening economic interdependence with neighbouring states and expanding China's regional and global influence. These multiple objectives underscore the initiative's role as an integrated framework that combines economic modernisation with strategic statecraft. As China's economic footprint has expanded, ensuring secure access

to overseas markets, investment opportunities, and supply chains has become a central policy priority. The BRI provides an institutional mechanism through which Beijing can cultivate an external economic environment conducive to sustained national development while reducing its dependence on existing trade architectures dominated by advanced industrial economies. [13] In this respect, the initiative maps China's long-term vision to inculcate a regional economic order in which it occupies a central coordinating role through enhanced connectivity, production networks, and cross-border economic integration. Infrastructure connectivity constitutes the operational foundation of this strategy. The development of transnational transport corridors, railways, highways, ports, logistics hubs, and related infrastructure is intended to facilitate trade, reduce transportation costs, and improve the movement of goods across Eurasia and beyond. Among these projects, the China–Europe Railway Express has emerged as one of the most visible symbols of the BRI's connectivity agenda. By linking numerous Chinese manufacturing centres with major European destinations through regular freight services, the railway has diversified Eurasian trade routes and accelerated the movement of a growing range of commodities, including electronics, automobiles, industrial machinery, consumer goods, agricultural products, and intermediate manufacturing inputs. The expansion of these transport corridors has reinforced China's integration into regional and global value chains while reducing logistical constraints associated with traditional maritime shipping routes. [14]

The BRI has also created substantial opportunities for Chinese engineering, construction, and infrastructure enterprises, many of which possess significant technological capabilities and extensive experience in executing large-scale development projects. Overseas infrastructure investment has consequently become an important avenue for exporting China's industrial capacity, engineering expertise, and technical standards. Nevertheless, despite its developmental potential, the initiative has generated considerable debate regarding the economic sustainability of many projects. Questions surrounding commercial viability, debt sustainability, financial returns, governance standards, environmental consequences, and long-term implementation risks continue to shape international assessments of the BRI. These concerns highlight the complexities of translating China's ambitious connectivity vision into economically viable and politically sustainable development outcomes across diverse regional contexts.

### **BRI for Shared Development**

One of the principal economic rationales underpinning the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” is its capacity to facilitate the international expansion of Chinese industries while addressing structural imbalances within the domestic economy. As China's economic transformation has progressed, several sectors have experienced declining domestic demand and persistent industrial overcapacity, particularly in heavy manufacturing and infrastructure-related industries. In response, Beijing has promoted the policy of *international industrial capacity*

cooperation, which encourages Chinese enterprises to relocate production, invest abroad, and integrate into overseas markets. Within this framework, the BRI serves as a strategic platform for transferring excess productive capacity while simultaneously creating new avenues for industrial and commercial expansion. [15]

The policy primarily prioritises infrastructure-related sectors, including construction, engineering, equipment manufacturing, steel, cement, and building materials. Many participating BRI countries are developing or transition economies characterised by substantial infrastructure deficits and increasing demand for transport and urban development. Consequently, these economies provide favourable conditions for Chinese firms to undertake large-scale projects involving highways, railways, ports, airports, logistics facilities, and associated industrial infrastructure. Such investments not only generate overseas business opportunities for China's globally competitive construction enterprises but also help absorb surplus industrial capacity accumulated during the country's rapid phase of domestic infrastructure expansion.

A second strategic dimension of the BRI concerns energy security and natural resource cooperation. Many partner countries possess abundant storage of oil, natural gas, minerals, and other strategic resources essential to China's long-term economic development. By investing in energy infrastructure, pipeline networks, power generation facilities, refineries, and related industrial equipment, Beijing seeks to diversify both the geographical sources of resource imports and the transportation corridors through which they are delivered. This strategy reduces vulnerability to supply disruptions while strengthening China's long-term resource security through deeper economic engagement with resource-rich regions. [16]

The initiative has likewise reinforced the world presence of Chinese engineering contractors and "state-owned enterprises (SOEs)", many of which possess extensive expertise in executing large-scale infrastructure projects. Overseas contracting under the BRI has become an important mechanism through which these firms export technology, engineering services, technical standards, and project management capabilities. Their expanding participation in infrastructure development across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America reflects the increasing international competitiveness of China's construction sector and its growing role in global infrastructure finance and implementation. [17]

An equally significant component of the BRI is the creation of worldwide industrial parks, economic centres, and trade zones. These zones provide industrial infrastructure, logistics networks, administrative support, and public services that facilitate the relocation of Chinese manufacturing enterprises while promoting industrial clustering and investment in host economies. They also function as institutional platforms for strengthening production networks, attracting foreign investment, fostering technology transfer, and integrating host countries into local and global supply chains. The concentration of a substantial proportion of China's overseas industrial parks within BRI partner countries demonstrates that these zones have

become a central instrument of Beijing's outward economic strategy.

Taken together, these initiatives indicate that the BRI extends well beyond infrastructure connectivity. It represents a comprehensive geoeconomic strategy designed to internationalise Chinese industrial capacity, expand overseas investment, secure strategic resources, deepen production linkages, and reinforce China's central position within emerging regional and global economic networks. Through the integration of infrastructure development, industrial relocation, energy cooperation, and overseas economic zones, the BRI is designated as China's contemporary opening-up policy and an important vehicle for projecting its long-term economic influence beyond its borders. [18]

## CONCLUSION

From the period of Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy reveals a gradual but profound transformation in both strategic orientation and diplomatic instruments. Mao's foreign policy was largely evolved by revolutionary notions and geopolitical confrontation; Deng Xiaoping redirected diplomacy toward economic modernisation and strategic restraint; Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao institutionalised China's integration into the global economy through multilateral engagement and peaceful development; and Xi Jinping has elevated China's foreign policy into a comprehensive grand strategy that combines economic statecraft, technological leadership, institutional innovation, and military modernisation. [19]

Despite increased international scrutiny and strategic conflict, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing's foreign policy continues to be officially framed around sovereignty, peaceful development, mutually beneficial cooperation, and national rejuvenation. Whether interpreted as a responsible stakeholder seeking reform of the international order or as a rising power pursuing greater strategic influence, Xi Jinping's foreign policy showcases a decisive evolution in China's grand plan. It demonstrates how sustained economic growth has enabled Beijing to move beyond the developmental diplomacy of the reform era toward a more ambitious vision in which China seeks not merely to participate in the existing international system but to shape its future trajectory. This evolution constitutes one of the defining geopolitical transformations of the twenty-first century and provides the analytical foundation for comprehending China's expanding role in world politics and geoeconomics.

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