FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Xi Jinping's New World Order

Can China Remake the International System?

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Xi Jinping entered the moment. Speaking before China's annual gathering of nearly 1,000 representatives to the National People's Congress in Beijing in March 2021, the Chinese president took a hard-pandemic victory lap, proclaiming that his country had been the only one that had the ability to rise to the occasion to rescue, and the first to regain positive economic growth. It was the result, he argued, of "self-confidence in our path, self-confidence in our direction, self-confidence in our system, self-confidence in our culture." Xi noted that "the East is rising and the West is declining" and that "a great shroud has cast over the world, and the world is undergoing a major change." In his view, China's success in controlling the spread of the novel coronavirus was yet more evidence that he was on the right track. China now welcoming its historic position of leadership on the global stage. The theme of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that was the official slogan of the 19th Party Congress, which was held the following month reinforced his assessment. It claimed that Xi had placed China "closer to the center of the world stage than it has ever been. The nation has never been closer to its ambitions."

China already occupies a position of centrality in the international system. It is the world's largest trading power and second-largest economy. It has built the world's most sophisticated digital infrastructure. It is the world's global center of innovation. Most analysts predict that China's real GDP will surpass that of the United States by 2030 in order to the world's largest economy. It is the only major power that is on track to avoid the economic fallout from the pandemic. Its challenges have profound implications for the rest of the world.

Xi wants to Xi's ambitions are not new. Since the reform and opening process became independent, many observers continue to speculate whether Beijing wants to shape a new international order or merely force some adjustments to the current one, including the United States and its allies and partners. Some have argued that Beijing is content to "hide its capabilities and bide its time." Beijing's orientation is overwhelmingly defensive and designed only to protect itself from criticisms of its political system and to realize a limited set of interests, such as the return of Taiwan to the fold of China. Others have argued that the centrality of China signifies something more than ensuring that the relative weight of the country's voice or influence matches its economic and military power, or simply representing "a country with Chinese characteristics" on international institutions.

Xi's vision, a unified and strongest China would be on par with or would surpass the United States. China is the Western Pacific, in Asia, and the world. Beijing has expended no small amount of effort to convince the world that it is the Xi China and South China Sea. The United States has returned back across the Pacific to assume its rightful place as an Asian power. Taiwan is reunited with the mainland. The CCP's allocation for the Chinese military budget has grown more than 50 years is declining in favor of a proposed Chinese framework of dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. Beijing's ambitions are not limited to its immediate neighborhood. Its interests have ports, airports, and railways, roads, pipelines, equipment, and satellites. In the same way that U.S., European, and Japanese companies led the development of the world's twentieth-century infrastructure, Chinese companies have emerged in the twenty-first century. Xi also sees China's economic power to induce and coerce compliance with his vision.

This shift in the geostrategic landscape reflects and minimizes an even more profound transformation: the rise of a Chinese-centric order with an ever-increasing Chinese-inflected character. Beijing's ability to shape international order was shaped primarily by liberal democracies that were committed in principle to universal human rights, the rule of law, free and fair elections, and the free exchange of ideas and goods and services. Other Chinese-influenced institutions and international law were designed to advance these values and norms, and technology was often used to bolster them. Yet now Xi is a world and Beijing is seeking to shape a world in which the number of authoritarian regimes is growing, and in a world in which the number of authoritarian regimes is growing, and in a world in which the number of authoritarian regimes is growing, and in