The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the debate between China and the United States over future leadership of the global order that has been dominated by the US since the end of the Second World War. Global Asia looks at China’s vision for a world order that could displace that of the US.

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Behind the rivalry between China and the United States — and other Western powers — are deep, historical and significant differences over the very nature of China's evolving conception of world order.

Few Westerners — scholars or politicians — appreciate the Chinese notion of tianxia, ‘everything under heaven,’ or understand how this ancient concept informs Beijing's approach to contemporary challenges, writes Shiu Sin Por.

REAL POLITICS, geopolitics or power politics — these traditional and dominating theories of international relations are still the norm within diplomatic and academic circles worldwide. But we are having a hard time using these theories to explain what is happening in the world today. Some find it difficult to fit China’s behavior into a simple geo-political narrative. Nevertheless, many are still seeing and explaining China’s foreign policy in this framework.

China, as a rising power, is the second largest economy in the world and will soon be the largest. The country has inevitably become the focus of this discussion, and as expected, has been repeatedly asked about its views on international relations and the current world order. Suspicions and doubts about Beijing’s intentions and ambitions are unavoidable. China is trying hard to explain its positions, so far with limited success. It needs a new narrative for its view of the world and its international relations.

China asserts that it is not an imperialist power and has no hegemonic intentions. But its expansive “Belt and Road Initiative” invited strong opposition from the US and suspicions from many corners of the world. The South China Sea disputes also make her neighbors nervous and the US agitated. The US has called China a “revisionist” power that tries to upend the existing order and replace the US as the dominant world power. All this is happening while China openly declares that it does not even want to be the world’s second power. Being third place is a lot better because you will not have the top guy watching over you. How to square China’s expanding international activities and influence with its assertion of non-hegemonic intention? What is China's concept of the world and nation-to-nation relations?

CHINA’S APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The contemporary basis of China’s international relations can be summed up in five building blocks. They have all been created since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Some are old, emerging in the early 1950s, most of them are quite new, formulated just in the last few years, since Xi Jinping came to power. To my knowledge, these five elements were never grouped together and presented as one comprehensive theory. As China’s approach to international relations is still in its formative stage, these five elements might not be the final blueprint. But they are sufficient to give a full and fundamental picture of China's concept of world order. I group these elements under the ancient Chinese concept of tianxia (天 下), “everything under heaven,” an old world view with contemporary applications.

These five elements of China's conception of international relations are as follows.

1) The Nation State

The basis of China's international relations is the affirmation of the nation state. The concept was once new to China and the Chinese. Before the 20th century, China's conception of itself was very different from the concept of a nation state developed in the West since the mid-1600s. Many Western scholars have asserted that China is more a civilization than a modern state. Lucian Pye claimed that “China is a civilization that pretends to be a nation state.” This is basically wrong. China no doubt is a civilization and Chinese civilization is no doubt an important basis for the modern Chinese state. But this Western concept of the nation state, an entity with a clearly defined territorial, citizenship and a government recognized by others as legitimate, was alien to old China. These three criteria were forced upon China by contemporary nation-to-nation interactions. China in the old days had no concept of a well-defined boundary. A marker stone would be used to define a region, not a border. China's definition of citizenship was not by race or religion. Anyone who accepted and acquired Chinese culture was considered a subject, not so much a citizen in the modern sense. It had the concept of legitimacy of government, but not in international relations. The Chinese emperor never required recognition from other nations.

China, since the mid-19th century, was forced to deal with a world it barely knew. After many painful lessons, it tried hard to reconcile its understanding of the world and itself with the reality of modern international relations. China is not “pretending” to be a nation state. China has been “struggling” in the last hundred years to be a nation state. The PRC laid out its modern definition of citizenship in the 1950s, replacing the definition used by the Nationalist Chinese (Kuomintang), which is by blood. The PRC is still struggling to define its land and sea borders. Not many are aware that it was not until recently — certainly not at the time the new republic was formed in 1949 — that China had clearly defined land borders, with the exception of that between China and India. As for sea boundaries, they are still in formation because of disputes with China’s many neighbors, which are also undergoing the same process of nation building. The South China Sea disputes are the living examples of this.

China now fully accepted the modern concept of the nation state, either willingly or without a choice. But it is still struggling to construct its modern statehood. One of the complications is that China is not a uni-ethnic country. After great difficulties, it consolidated its many minor
After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's national identity had been recognized national minorities. How these nationalities fit into a single huge state is an ongoing struggle. Therefore, opposite to Western experience, ethnicity/race/religion/language are more a barrier than a fostering factor in China's national identity-building effort. Building a national identity in China is only in its early stages, as can be seen in the cases of Xinjiang and Tibet. China's national identity had been mostly forged as a result of past resistance to foreign interventions and invasions, a negative factor. The affirmative, positive elements of Chinese national identity have been strengthened mostly since 1949, after the establishment of the PRC. It is still very basic and fragile.

Despite difficulties on this front, China firmly accepts this modern concept of the nation state as the basis for nation-to-nation relations. From this, it has put forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence as the basis of inter-state relations.

2) The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence
These five principles — mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence — were first espoused by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1953 when he met with an Indian delegation.² They were put forth to the world, with wide acceptance, at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955. The principles were largely reflected in the conference's final communique and have been the cornerstone of China's relations with other countries. These principles are fully consistent with the United Nations Charter. China sees these principles as the foundation of nation-to-nation relations and has adamantly adhered to them ever since. There are many accusations of China interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, though little evidence has been given to support these accusations. Providing support to Third World countries' anti-colonial or revolutionary struggles in the 1950s and 1960s was not seen by China as interfering at the time, and these activities were stopped at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

3) New Model of Major-Country Relations³
President Xi brought forward this concept in a meeting with US President Barack Obama in 2013. The presence of a number of large, major countries is a reality in the current world. That they play a role of proportion, or disproportional, influence in world affairs is also a reality. China suggested the development of a special relationship among the major players in world affairs so their leadership and key roles can be co-ordinated and played to their full effect. This is also intended to manage their differences, reduce conflicts and foster co-operation in a multi-polar, globalized and diverse world. China rejected the concept of “Chinamerica,” or a G2, which would narrow the leadership of world affairs to just two superpowers, because several other powers are also very substantial and significant. This concept is meant to supplement the efforts of the UN, not replace it.

4) The Belt and Road Initiative⁴
The BRI — at first called the New Silk Road — is no doubt the wake-up call for the West to face the reality of a rising China on the world stage. The initiative was widely interpreted by the West as a desperate solution for China to deal with her surplus production capacity. But soon after, they realized that this is not just an attempt to solve China's domestic problems. The BRI has tremendous geopolitical significance. By the time of this realization it could no longer be stopped or contained.

The label “Silk Road” evokes historical nostalgia and has a poetic flavor. It was a masterstroke of packaging for the initiative. But the BRI really has nothing to do with geography if you look at its actions and programs — a fact that should be obvious by now. The BRI is everywhere, not just in Central Asia. Any country anywhere can be a part of it. It is simply a Chinese effort to forge China's foreign relations through joint developments. The BRI also is not a Chinese Marshall Plan. It is not an aid program. Projects are done on an economic and business-like basis. Aid elements are only occasional and supplementary. It is an export of the Chinese development experience: infrastructure comes first, economic development comes second. But that is not what the BRI is all about. It has five components: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds. The BRI is a very comprehensive approach to building nation-to-nation relations. Economic development is only one of the focal points, but not its sole purpose. So, it is understandable that the initiative draws political concerns from major powers. There is no doubt that the BRI has diplomatic implications and geopolitical effects, and China is not denying them.

In pushing the initiative, China has laid out its principles, namely consultation, joint efforts and mutual benefits. These three principles form the working basis of the efforts under the BRI. Nobody is forced to join any project. They do so only if they think it is beneficial to them. So it is for China.

Policy synchronization, infrastructure connectivity, free trade, financial and capital flows and people-to-people relations are vastly different.
from the traditional foreign investment activities of the developed countries in the under-developed and developing world before and after the Second World War. Some interpret this as Chinese “imperialism.” But the subject countries do not see it that way despite many insinuations and accusations. They can clearly see the differences in the two approaches in action.

Building nation-to-nation relationships through joint efforts in economic development is at the core of China’s approach to international relations. This is done on a voluntary consensus basis to mutual benefit. Combating poverty and striving for economic development, as opposed to promotion of alien political systems and social values, is seen by China as a way of helping other countries to get out of their difficult political situations. There may not be a definitive relationship between political stability and economic development, but at least it can help. As its actions preclude a judgment on the nature of the partner regime, China has been criticized for helping dictators and authoritarian regimes. This is the essential difference between China’s approach and the Western approach. China does not pre-judge the nature of the regime it is working with in building nation-to-nation relations, part of her five principles of peaceful co-existence. History will tell who is right and who is wrong in these different approaches. I think so far we already have a partial answer. Political systems imposed from outside hardly ever work. Besides, many of those who accuse China of helping dictators and authoritarian governments are doing it themselves for different reasons.

5) The Construction of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

Finally, China vows to build up a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility. This is not as far-fetched as it might sound. The case of global warming is a good illustration of the common welfare and responsibility that no nation, no individual can escape. The current Covid-19 pandemic illustrates this connection brilliantly. Issues like this call for common effort. Without it, these problems are unlikely to be solved. The world faces many issues of this nature, for example, refugees and mass migration, population explosions, the future of energy and so on. All require joint efforts and place new burdens and challenges on the world community and institutions. International relations can no longer remain at the level of geo-politics and real-politics, or be built purely out of concern for one’s national self-interest.

In summary, China’s tianxia view of international relations is built on the basis of modern nation-state principles, a theory which may be a little bit outdated but is still basic, relevant and necessary. Together with a vision and purpose for the interests and future of humanity, through joint efforts to improve the economic conditions of everyone, under the driving force and support of major players and existing international institutions, tianxia is both a view of the world and of inter-nation relations.

THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF TIANXIA

Tianxia is the overarching concept that gives coherence to the five building blocks. Unfortunately, this core concept is not easily understood in the West, especially not by Western mainstream international relations experts. Any variations of geopolitics, real politics or power politics not only cannot reflect the basic substance of the concept of tianxia, they also grossly distort it. A good starting point is the historical origin of the term. “Tian” is sky, or heaven without any religious connotation. “Xia” is under, or underneath. The literal meaning is “all under heaven.” To the Chinese, tianxia practically refers to the known world, to them. This is equivalent to “everything under the sky,” except it mainly refers to human beings and human society. Fairbank understood it as the Chinese concept of world order. This is basically correct and accurate. But its substance has to be updated. Tianxia in the modern context retains its old meaning of a term referring to the known human world. Since the known human world has more than one culture, tianxia, as Chinese use the term now, does not embrace a particular culture, and is definitely not based on Chinese culturalism. It today advocates mutual respect and acceptance of various cultures, and voluntary fusion of them for a better end. No one dominates. No acceptance of any particular culture is required. It is not an attempt to spread Chinese culture. The cultural element and influence are only consequential, partial, or supplementary factors in the spread of the concept of tianxia.

Another popular misunderstanding is to view this concept as a Sino-centric world view. This is ahistorical and misplaced. That China saw itself as the center of the world is true only before the second half of the 19th century. It is definitely not the case since the beginning of the last century. Since the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1911, and more likely long before that, China had realized and accepted the fact that it was only one country among many, and that it is not necessarily the biggest or the strongest. The tianxia concept endures, but no longer has China at the center of the world, neither politically nor culturally. The original idea, that tianxia is everyone’s tianxia, remains. Dr. Sun Yet-sen, the founder of Republican China, may be the first prominent Chinese to espouse this expansive understanding and meaning when he proclaimed “天下为公” — “tianxia is for (and belongs to) the public (everyone)” — an accurate presentation of this ancient definition of an ancient Chinese concept to the modern world.

To use this old word is to crown contemporary China’s concept of world order and to set a premise, a basis for the country’s overall approach to the world and inter-nation relations. It starts and ends with humanity as a whole, not just one nation, while respecting the integrity of the nation state. This is significant because it is a fundamental departure from Western theories of its kind.

The conception of tianxia recognizes the existence of modern nation states as a fact. It may be only an intermediate form toward something bigger and better. But despite its many imperfections, contemporary challenges, and problems, we cannot and should not get rid of it now. China strongly defends this basic unit that makes up the world community today. China is a supporter of the UN despite its problems and limitations. China’s view of international relations is pragmatic and does not envision a strong and effective world government. Supplementing and complimenting the UN, it sees building bilateral or multi-lateral co-operation as a more practical and feasible means to resolve problems, at least for the foreseeable future.

The fact that tianxia starts with the nation state means China regards the protection of national interests as a primary concern for every nation. This applies to every country under the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. This does not contradict the tianxia concept. Under this principle, there is nothing wrong with US President Donald Trump’s “America First,” except that he forgot to mention the responsibilities of the US as the leading and dominant power in the world — a status he and many of his fellow geopolitical, real-political and power-political Americans guard vigorously.

In the post-Cold War era, the traditional concept of national sovereignty has been under constant challenge. The assertion of so-called universal values such as human rights, freedom, liberal democracy and the rule of law were
on many occasions to justify interference in the internal affairs of other countries. China strongly disagrees with this practice vigorously promoted by the West. China upholds the UN Charter, which requires respect for each member-state’s sovereignty. The *tianxia* concept does not preclude involvement in another country's internal affairs, but this must not be done by coercion. The principle seeks mutual acceptance, persuasion, education and exemplary behavior by the big and strong. Global issues such as climate change and pandemics require international cooperation. If this involves the surrender of some sovereign powers, it must be voluntary. No force should be used. The BRI projects are not done on a quid pro quo basis with political requirements attached, like some US foreign aid.

China's world view and concept of international relations, as presented here, is comprehensive, has continuity and is in its developmental stage. It is fundamentally different from Western theories of geopolitics, real politics and power politics, even though they are both based on nation states. China’s world view starts with nationhood but always considers humanity as a whole. China does not deny the reality of geopolitics, real politics and power politics. But it rises above them. *Tianxia* is an alternative to the Western model, surpassing it but not necessarily replacing it.

**CONCLUSION**

The concept of *tianxia*, in its ancient form, has some familiarity to countries such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and some other Southeast Asian countries with affiliations to Chinese culture. It also has some footing in France and Germany among certain intellectuals because of Prof. Zhao Tingyang’s efforts. People in the West — government leaders, officials and scholars in particular — may find it hard to understand and accept this non-Western approach to nation-to-nation relations and the world order. The resistance is rooted in deep cultural, social and philosophical differences. But in today’s globalized world, the interplay of ideas should be more than welcome. Objective developments require a new approach. Actions speak louder than words. China, I believe, is trying to convince others of her *tianxia* view more by actions than words.

In closing, I would like to quote Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), a well-respected scholar and historian in the late Qing Dynasty and early republican period. He laid out the difference between China's political philosophy and its Western counterparts quite frankly in his struggle to wrestle with the Western concept of the nation state in his *History of Chinese Political Thought During the early Qin Period*. In it, he said:

> European nation-states have their roots in the city government and castle township in the Middle Ages. Their political theory emerged from this basis. This type of organization’s underlying principle is the consolidation of forces within to withstand and defy those without, so that hatred for foreigners is the means of arousing patriotic feelings. In their extreme, the nourishment of emotional racial-hatred groups, the bud of nationalism grows into full foliage. The more it develops, the more pronounced the disorders of modern society. On the other hand, since civilization began, the Chinese people have never considered national government as the highest form of social organization. Their political ethics has always been in terms of all mankind, with world peace (平天下) as the final goal, and family and nation only as stages in perfecting the World Order (*Tianxia*). China has contended, moreover, that political activities should never be the prerogative of, or for the benefit of, any one group or section of mankind.

This outlines the concept of *tianxia* well in its historical context and explains its difference with modern Western concepts better than anyone.

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