

Book Review

China's World: What Does China Want?

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Brown, Kerry. 2017. *China's World: What Does China Want?* London: I.B. Tauris. 243pp.

In a relatively short period of time, the People's Republic of China has moved from a position of profound distrust towards the world to one of the most engaged actors in the contemporary international scene. This phenomenon made the country one of the most studied of the 21st century. In the academic field of International Relations, issues such as relations with the United States, performance in the United Nations, BRICS, and separatism in the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet are among the most discussed. However, although there is a consolidated literature on different aspects of the Chinese international performance, there is a certain lack of broader studies that try to capture the essence of China under a macro lens. Such tendency towards excessive disaggregation and use of complex theories and methodologies in the social sciences has excluded from the debate a considerable number of people who are concerned with and maybe could take part in the discussion. As Shambaugh (2013: iv) had already noted: 'Although this has perhaps allowed us to know more about the "trees," it has not necessarily led to a better understanding of the "forest."

In *China's World: What Does China Want?*, Kerry Brown, Professor of Chinese Studies at King's College London, seeks to fill this gap by providing a great account of the various challenges that the 'Middle Kingdom' faces throughout this century. In the first chapter, Brown summarizes the principles that have governed Chinese foreign policy historically. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the Communists' narrative was based on a double liberation: internally, from feudalism and old thought; and externally from oppression. In this context, 'national humiliation,' 'struggle,' 'liberation' and 'rebirth' were among the themes recurrently used by Communist leaders to ensure the necessary public support for the mission that the country has since been involved in: rebuilding its international prominence.

Such exaggerated rhetoric and constant mention of the so-called century of humiliation – basically between the First Opium War and the 1949 Revolution – gave an emotional aspect to the People's Republic's foreign policy in the early stages of its founding.

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Over time, however, this kind of ‘big strategy’ has been appropriated by the new leaders according to the evolution of the international scene. Deng Xiaoping advocated a ‘low profile’ policy, Hu Jintao’s government signed the ideas of peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation, and Xi Jinping has consistently referred to the so-called ‘Chinese Dream.’

In Chapter 2, Brown discusses how the Chinese government’s decision-making around international issues has become more complex over the years due to the emergence of new institutional themes and actors. Xi currently has to deal with different sources of power within the administration, such as the Ministries of Commerce and Finance, as well as state-owned enterprises, mainly oil companies. Nevertheless, foreign policy decisions are still being made by a small group consisting of Xi himself, Chancellor Wang Yi, adviser Yang Jiechi, Wang Huning, as well as Trade, Finance and National Defense ministers. One of the recent attempts to shed light in the new foreign policy actors in China was made by Jakobson and Knox (2010).

Within this institutional framework that composes the decision-making process, Brown outlines his main argument, on which is based the rest of the book. In his view, China’s foreign policy binds the world in strategic zones based on four elements: economic ties; security interests; technology and intellectual assets; geographical proximity. In this sense, resembling Xi Jinping’s international politics, the author’s categorization delineates the world in four areas (USA, Asia, the European Union, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa), addressed in separate chapters that explain how each one fits into the great Chinese global strategy. In Brown’s words:

Put simply, a country which has high levels of trade with China, common, overlapping security interests in terms of the power of its armed forces and extent of its alliances, strong technology and intellectual assets and geographical closeness, will matter more to it than somewhere which has low trade levels, few common security interests of issues, limited technology or intellectual assets, and is geographically distant. Of course, no single country occupies these extremes (...) But most countries can be located along a spectrum where each factor spelled out above can be tallied and a rough measure of its importance to China given (2017: 69-70).

Given the fact that ‘under Xi Jinping, the strategy has been to attach a specific label to each of these relationship “zones”’ (Brown 2017: 72), this strategic division of the world in which contemporary Chinese foreign policy works can be visualized through the box below.

Box 1: Chinese Foreign Policy and the world of zones

Zone	Label	Economy	Security	Technology	Geography
USA	New model of major power relations	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (Pacific)
Asia	Belt Road Initiative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
EU	Civilizational powers	Yes	No	Yes	No
ME, LA, Africa	X	Yes	Yes	No	No

Source: created by the author based on information from Brown (2017).

In the case of the United States, China shares narrow interests in the economic and technological arenas, despite the clear security disparities, which are flagrant in the disputes involving the South China Sea and Taiwan. As for the geographical proximity, for the Chinese it can be said that 'only' the Pacific separates the two countries. In order to classify this bilateral axis according to its view of the world, China has often turned to the label of a supposed 'new model of relationship between great powers.'

In Zone 2, understood as its surrounding region, China has close relations in all the questions: economy, security, technology and geography. Central and Southern Asia, in particular, plays a relevant geopolitical role for China's great initiative in the 21st century: the New Silk Road. Among the countries of East Asia, despite the great flow of investment and economic integration, the aforementioned litigation in the South Sea has cooled relations.

In the case of the European Union, despite geographical distance and lack of common security issues, China has strong interests in the economic and technological fields. In addition to being an important trading partner, the European Union is also the destination of a considerable number of Chinese students who seek to study abroad. Relying on diplomatic rhetoric of mutual identification, China-EU relations are often presented by both sides as relations among 'civilizational powers.'

Finally, in Zone 4 China gives special attention to the Middle East, where it has high investments in the energy sector. The high instability has raised the region to priority status within the international performance of the country in terms of security. Africa and Latin America, in turn, appear as potential recipients of Chinese investment in natural resources and infrastructure, although the American continent is Washington's buffer zone and hosts a significant portion of countries that still diplomatically recognize Taiwan – for example: Paraguay, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras.

How would China react if Taiwan declares its independence unilaterally? Under the presidency of Donald Trump, how should Sino-American relations unfold? Is there a solution on the horizon for border disputes between China and India? Questions like these will become increasingly recurrent over the next few years, and although there are no answers for now, books like Kerry Brown's can be useful for a well-informed debate.

References

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