

The Sino-Pakistani relationship: China's testing ground as benevolent major power

Dorothee Vandamme
Université catholique de Louvain

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In 1998, while analyzing American exercise of power in a unipolar world, Kagan wonders “after all, what, in truth, are the alternatives?”¹. Twenty years later, few would hesitate in putting forward China as a potential and increasingly credible answer. Nowhere is China's ambition of becoming a leader more evident than in its region. In particular, the bilateral relation it has established with Pakistan illustrates a growing Asian geopolitical dynamic which revolves around Beijing and questions American leadership. Yet in a region marred by conflictuality and mistrust, the Beijing-Islamabad axis stands as an example of Chinese foreign policy to establish its leadership: how is China's bilateral relationship with Pakistan illustrative of its positioning as a benevolent power in the Asian region?

China's centrality in Pakistan can be explained by a combination of several factors. The shared enmity they have vis-à-vis India forges the base upon which the two countries develop their relations: “China and Pakistan have traditionally valued one another as a strategic hedge against India”². In this regard, the latest manifestations of this partnership, crystallized in the consequential China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are illustrative of a decades-long trend of a bilateral relation built upon containing the emergence of India as a regional and global power. Of importance is the place that China holds as Pakistan's main arms supplier, in particular the assistance Beijing has provided to Pakistan's nuclear program³. The relation gained particular momentum after the signing of the 2006 US-India nuclear agreement, which provoked fear in Pakistan that India might develop its arsenal with improved technology as it was being normalized into the nuclear international regime – a position that Pakistan has long sought, without any luck. The broader pattern of perceived American foreign policy inconsistencies and volatility of support, in particular since the 9/11 events and the international intervention in Afghanistan, has led Pakistan to reinforce its relation with China in order to counterbalance its reliance on American aid and support. China is seen, in this regard, as a possible alternative to the United States⁴. On the other hand, Beijing perceives Pakistan as a central key to its regional and global strategy in its rise to the status of global power. Yet, despite CPEC's potential of being a “game changer”⁵, some observers have noted that the most recent evolution of the relationship, with CPEC at its core, illustrates the inherent asymmetry of this relation which is forged on little else than a common mistrust and adversity for India. The imbalance between Beijing and Islamabad leads to wonder whether China really needs

¹ Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire”

² Jamal Afridi and Jayshree Bajoria, “China-Pakistan Relations”, Council on Foreign Relations, 06 July 2010.

³ Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Gurgaon, Random House India, 2015, p. 27-46.

⁴ Interviews with high-ranked diplomats by the author, Islamabad and Lahore, March-April 2016.

⁵ Umair Jamal, “Understanding China's ‘Master Plan’ for Pakistan”, *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2017.

Pakistan at all in its strategy, and why, in fact, it invests so much in this relation. Indeed, as one analyst puts it, “the Pakistanis love China for what it can do for them, while the Chinese love Pakistanis despite what they do to themselves”⁶.

We contend that a socialization perspective on this relation can contribute to bring its underlying dynamics to light in the broader context of Chinese foreign policy. Since the advantages that Pakistan receives from this relation are rather more evident than China’s, we focus on China’s perspective to understand the intriguing puzzle that the bilateral relation represents. The paper argues that China’s bilateral relation with Pakistan is illustrative of its positioning as a benevolent power in the Asian context. This strategy is analyzed as an attempt by Beijing to assert itself as non-threatening major regional leader. After presenting the theoretical framework of power benevolence through socialization in the first part, we develop the two forms that Chinese power takes in the region, namely the adoption of a role of norm-maker through the discourse on sovereignty, and the establishment of a network of patronage relations. The final part focuses on our case study and identifies the specificities of Chinese-Pakistani relations in the larger context of China’s ascent to power.

An addendum should be made here that although we focus on China’s international agency vis-à-vis Pakistan, we do not defend that Pakistan’s foreign policy is a function of China’s. This article is part of a larger study which develops Pakistan’s international agency, and which, among others, develops Pakistan’s positioning vis-à-vis China’s foreign policy.

1. Conceptualizing benevolent power in IR

The concept of benevolent power in international relations refers to “the exercise of power”⁷. Operationalizing this concept means reflecting on the link between capacities, style of foreign policy and use of power, and national culture. In this sense, foreign policy is seen as a reflection of specific worldview and historical narratives. The exercise of a benevolent type of power versus a dominating or coercive one is purposeful, and requires a specific type of behavior in international relations. Indeed, we begin with a simple question: why do rich and powerful states voluntarily part with and share a portion of their wealth and power? Benevolence in IR is usually linked to the analysis of empires, hegemons, or global leaders⁸. As a consequence, the identification of behavioral characteristics of benevolent power has been an inductive process of listing foreign policies typical and recurring in the actual foreign policies of these states under study. The basis upon which the benevolent use of power is based is that the benevolent state accounts for the interests of weaker states in its strategic calculations and engages in self-restraint in its use of power: “a greater absolute size

⁶ F.S. Aijazuddin, *From a Head, Through a Head, To a Head: The Secret Channel between the US and China through Pakistan*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 20.

⁷ Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire”, *Foreign Policy*, summer 1998.

⁸ Kagan 1998; Stephen D. Krasner, 1976. “State Power and the Structure of International Trade.” *World Politics* 28(3): 317–347; G. John Ikenberry, 2001. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and The Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; David A. Lake, 2009. *Hierarchy in International Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. For an in-depth analysis of the difference between these three types of hierarchical structures, see Struye de Swielande, *Duel entre l’Aigle et le Dragon pour le leadership mondial*, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2014.

of the largest actor means it has a greater interest in providing the good. The group is thus more likely to be privileged”⁹. From the point of view of the weaker states, benevolence is about differentiating on the one hand the consent of weaker states to comply by the rules and norms of a powerful state because they believe that the stronger state is acting according to their interests and not only its own, and on the other coercion by a powerful state that pressures and compels weaker states’ behaviors and agreement.

Empirically, however, disentangling consent and coercion proves difficult¹⁰: at what point do weaker states comply out of coercion rather than consent? Lake points out that “when benevolent, the leader provides the international economic infrastructure unilaterally, or at least bears a disproportionate cost of providing the public good, and thereby gains relatively less than others. When coercive, the leader forces other, smaller states to contribute to the international economic infrastructure and, at an extreme, to bear the entire burden”¹¹. Arguably, Lake provides here a way to differentiate coercion and benevolence empirically: it could thus be argued that the distinction can be identified in the gains of the weaker states for complying with the powerful state. If the gains that the former obtain for using a good provided by the latter are greater than what the latter can have, then it is likely that the powerful state engages in a benevolent use of its power. If the gains are reversed, then we can argue that power is exercised in a coercive manner. The literature commonly identifies the following characteristics as specificities for benevolent powers: preponderance in absolute capacities; making the choice to not dominate coercively; guaranteeing common goods (such as security, order, economic stability); binding itself to international institutions; respecting international commitment; building social relations so as to interlink the national interests of countries; respect for and defense of weaker countries’ sovereign rights; a social system which materially or socially favors the dominant power (the powerful state must want to remain at the top of the pyramid or else its use of power will diverge); presence of a certain level of coercion to ensure the status quo¹².

In understanding benevolence, the link between interest and capacity is of utmost importance: the benevolent state needs to have the absolute capacity to provide a desired good to other states, and this absolute superiority in capacity means that the dominant state has an interest in providing that good to others. Krasner’s take on benevolence offers a more structuralist perspective, as he argues that a powerful state has a self-interest in providing goods to other states¹³, because it maintains and perpetuates power relations and guarantees the positions of dominance and subordination. Likewise, Holmes notes that “(states) are thought to restrain themselves

⁹ Duncan Snidal, 1985. “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory.” *International Organization* 39(4): p. 588.

¹⁰ Steven Lukes, 2005. *Power: A Radical View*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ David A. Lake (1993), “Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?” *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (4), p. 467.

¹² Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire”; Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade”; Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*; Ikenberry, *After Victory*; Randall L. Schweller, “The Problem of International Order Revisited.” *International Security* 26(1), 2001, 161–186.

¹³ Stephen D. Krasner, 1976. “State Power and the Structure of International Trade.” *World Politics* 28(3): 317–347.

either when they are in the grip of moral norms or when they anticipate the advantages of self-restraint”¹⁴.

The benevolence of China’s exercise of power is rooted in both. The normative dimension contributes to and is retrospectively useful for the benefits China gains from exercising self-restraint. An additional element to account for is that Beijing is also constrained by the American superpower. The analysis focuses here on the China-Pakistan relationship, China being the powerful state and Pakistan the weaker one. Yet, contrary to most analyses on benevolent power, the powerful state under study is not the most powerful state in the overall international system. As a result, the analysis of China’s benevolent use of its power needs to be contextualized within the larger system in which Chinese foreign policy is itself partially a function of American exercise of power. Despite this structural constrain, however, our focus on China’s agency shows that its own exercise of power is both in response to structural forces and a result of historical narratives and strategic calculations made internally. In other words, Beijing mediates structural constraints precisely through a specific Chinese way of exercising its power. By exercising power through a benevolent form, China appears less threatening, and is able, to a certain extent, to ‘go under the radar’ by working within the rules of the American-led international system. Thus, Beijing does not confront Washington directly, but by using the norms and rules that the United States have implemented and reinforce as structuring the system. Moreover, as Waltz once pointed out, “in international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it”¹⁵. In order to avoid its neighboring countries from balancing against its rise as regional leader, China thus uses foreign policy tools and behaviors which convey a positive and trusting image of its growing involvement in regional and global affairs¹⁶.

In this setting, the analysis of China as a socializing agent in the Asia-Pacific acknowledges that Beijing’s foreign policy in the region is aimed at the introduction of a framework susceptible to China’s growing influence, with the aim to “educat(e) neighboring states about what Beijing perceives as appropriate behavior (and to favor) their adoption of the Chinese ‘perspectives toward themselves’ and, thus, importing the process of ‘conditioned foreign policy reflexes”¹⁷. In its broadest sense, socialization refers to “the way in which [agents] are assisted in becoming members of one or more social groups”¹⁸, in order to anchor them in a position considered adequate¹⁹ in the system and, ultimately, condition a logic of appropriateness based

¹⁴ Stephen Holmes, 2003. “Lineages of the Rule of Law.” In *Democracy and the Rule of Law*, ed. Jose Maria Maravall, and Adam Przeworski. New York, NY and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 24.

¹⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, “America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* vol. 24 no. 4, 1991, p. 669.

¹⁶ Shih C (1993) *China’s Just World. The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner; Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China’s Socialization of Central Asia”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, 2010.

¹⁷ Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China’s Socialization of Central Asia”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, 2010, p. 133.

¹⁸ Joan E. Grusec and Paul D. Hastings, “Preface”, in Joan E. Grusec and Paul D. Hastings (eds.), *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, 2nd edition, New York, The Guilford Press, 2015, p. xi.

¹⁹ The adequacy of the position is determined by the degree of convergence between a state’s self-role conception and others’ expectations. Inadequacy in the position and subsequent role will derive from a state enacting a role

on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Socialization is understood as a reciprocal, two-way process wherein the target of socialization is active – and not only reactive – in its own socialization process²⁰:

socialization [is not] a fully predictable process that compels [agents] to think, feel, and act in accord with the dictates of society. Nor [does it] simply promote cultural uniformity and the smooth reproduction of social order. Instead, [it] stresses the dynamic, reciprocal, and somewhat unpredictable nature of [the process].²¹

Hence socialization is a structuring process, which mechanism reinforces the status quo of the social order. The ultimate outcome of socialization is “the production of [agents] who can adjust themselves and their behavior to the situations they face”²² in accordance with the guidelines, values and norms of their social environment. This is evidence of the reciprocal nature of the process, and of the capacity of the state to “own” its social environment’s values and to integrate social messages so as to adopt a status and behavior relevant to the social environment. The ideal outcome of socialization is to lead “an agent [to switch] from following a logic of consequentiality to a logic of appropriateness”²³; i.e. from the actor being viewed as acting in a purely rational cost-benefits manner to “following internalized prescriptions of what is socially defined as normal, true, right or good, without, or in spite of, calculation of consequences and expected utility”²⁴.

Although it is generally understood in an intuitive manner as a vertical top-down mechanism (leaders socializing new comers into followers’ roles), it in fact also occurs as a vertical bottom-up, and a horizontal process. It is precisely because of the two-directionality of socialization that China as a socializer can be studied in the global context. Thus “an important aspect of dynamic systems theories [...] is that systems are seen to be self-equilibrating. [Social agents] act in such a way as to keep the partner’s behavior within acceptable boundaries”²⁵. Because socialization is eventually aimed at molding the norms that underwrite the external behavior of target states, it is inherently a *normative* process undertaken by a *normative* power. The use of benevolence is complementary to this process and feeds into it, as norms are an inherent part of the benevolent exercise of power and strategically reinforce the legitimacy of China in the status of regional leader.

which is rejected by the system and its units, or from a state enacting a role that it has not validated but that it is obliged to fulfill.

²⁰ We adopt here the theoretical paradigm of symbolic interactionism: in IR studies, the constructivist perspective borrows from symbolic interactionism in establishing that “(1) the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” ; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 1; The most recent evolution of symbolic interactionism has focused on its structural nature: each interaction among actors of a social system is seen as parts of the whole system, and shapes, in some way, the system.

²¹ Kent L. Sandstrom, Kathryn J. Lively, Daniel D. Martin and Gary Alan Fine, *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to Social Psychology and Sociology*, Fourth edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 86.

²² Sandstrom *et al.*, *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality*, p. 86.

²³ Jeffrey T. Checkel, “International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework”, *International Organization* 59:4, Autumn 2005, p. 804.

²⁴ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The logic of appropriateness”, *ARENA working papers*, Centre for European Studies, 04/09, p. 3.

²⁵ Eleanor E. Maccoby, “Historical Overview of Socialization Research and Theory”, p. 22.

The assertion is that “the normative power of China’s socialization (...) suggests that its ‘conception of its foreign policy role and behavior is bound to particular aims, values, principles as well as forms of influence and instruments of power’^{26,27}. Our analysis considers two mutually constitutive discursive or behavioral tools that underpin China’s foreign policy in its neighborhood, specifically vis-à-vis Pakistan: (1) embracing the role of norm-maker through the expansion of a Chinese-inspired model of interstate relations within the current US-led system, based on the discourse on sovereignty as reflecting China’s peaceful and non-threatening rise to power; (2) redefining social interstate relations of patronage politics by departing from the US model of patron-client relations.

2. China as a norm-maker: the discourse on sovereignty as rectification of the IS

China’s ascent is illustrative of the process whereby secondary powers, by integrating the rules of the game, gain in power and challenge the leader: by owning and implementing the rules of the capitalist liberal economic system, it has gained in relative power by becoming the second global economy – or the first, depending on the indicators used. The more it has gained in economic power, the more Beijing has taken a stand as defender of the norms and values which have formed the basis of the system, namely respect for state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in other states’ internal affairs. By acting not only as a norm-taker, but also as a norm-maker, China adopts one of the roles that is typically associated to higher statuses in the system: “rather than accepting the US version of the present UN-centered security system, China has attempted to revise the system by placing sovereign equality and non-intervention at the head of security management”²⁸.

By bringing these elements forward in its foreign policy, it has, implicitly or explicitly, opposed American (and more generally Western) interventionism, widely criticized from 2003 (Iraq) onwards. China defends the Westphalian-based norms of the system, i.e. state sovereignty over its territory and people, non-interference in other states’ internal affairs, and legal equality of all members of the system. Sovereign equality has become a “cardinal principle”²⁹ in Chinese foreign policy. As Zhou explains, Beijing thus defines sovereignty as the principle that “no country should interfere in the internal affairs of other countries under any pretext, let alone using its strength to invade, bully or overthrow [the government of] other countries. China never imposes its social system or ideology on others, and it will never allow others to impose their social systems or ideologies on itself”.³⁰

²⁶ Diez T (2005) Reconsidering ‘normative power’. *Millennium* 33(3): p. 617.

²⁷ Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China’s Socialization of Central Asia”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, p. 134.

²⁸ Cameron G. Thies, “China’s Rise and the Socialisation of Rising Powers”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8:3, 2015, p. 287; see also Xiaoyu Pu, “Socialization as a Two-Way Process: Rising Powers and the Diffusion of International Norms”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5:4, 2012, p. 341-367.

²⁹ “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, Keynote address by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations office in Geneva on January 18, 2017, *Xinhua*, 19 January 2017.

³⁰ Zhou Y (2004) *China’s Diplomacy*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, p. 53; cited in Kavalski, 2010, p. 136.

In his keynote speech at the UN office in Geneva in January 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted the meaning and essence of sovereignty: “the sovereignty and dignity of all countries, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, must be respected, their internal affairs allow no interference and they have the right to independently choose their social system and development path”³¹. This address is particularly illustrating of the continuity that Beijing establishes between the structuring norms of the system, i.e. the 1648-Westphalian principles, and the five principles of peaceful coexistence to which it has subscribed³². In this context, “the framework of ‘strategic sovereignty’ (Zhou, 2004: 53) has become one of the central normative underpinnings of the socializing agency of China’s foreign policy”³³.

The Chinese discourse on sovereignty is reinforced by its own historical narrative based on the Century of humiliations, and reflects the emphasis on a peaceful rise. In other words, what shapes the strategy of Chinese norm-making is a discursive triangle with the three nodes reinforcing one another: (i) sovereignty; (ii) peaceful rise; (iii) historical narrative based on the century of humiliation³⁴. The use of its past enables Beijing to reinforce the projection of a peaceful and friendly power, based on the discourse that they will ‘not do to others what others have done to them’: “the attempt to overcome the specters of history instills a critical reflexivity in the discursive identity-consciousness – that is, the self of the present is also the other of the past, which queries contemporary references to normative power (Diez, 2005: 634)”³⁵. The adoption of the ‘peaceful rise’ strategy, which became an official policy under President Hu Jintao to counter the discourse and perception of China’s rise as a threat, feeds into the broader strategy to “indicate the correctness (if not the appropriateness) of the norms and rules of Chinese international relations”³⁶. Such normative validation reflects the conviction by Chinese leader that the emergence of their country “transcend(s) the traditional ways for great powers to emerge”³⁷ and represents no threat to the international order. The emphasis on peaceful rise, strengthened by its historical narrative and built upon the ordering principle of sovereignty, serves as rhetorical confirmation that Beijing “will always be a source for world peace: it will never seek hegemony, and never seek any sphere of influence”³⁸.

Yet international relations also take place according to a second logic, the liberal one, which is based upon “free trade, democratic government, national self-determination,

³¹ “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, Keynote address by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations office in Geneva on January 18, 2017, *Xinhua*, 19 January 2017.

³² Kavalski, 2010, p. 136.

³³ Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China’s Socialization of Central Asia”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, 2010, p. 135.

³⁴ Likewise, Kavalski has identified “sovereignty, peaceful rise to international prominence, and overcoming the specters of the past” as the “rhetorical three-step of China’s foreign policy”; Kavalski, 2010, p. 137.

³⁵ Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China’s Socialization of Central Asia”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, 2010, p. 137.

³⁶ Kavalski, 2010, p. 136.

³⁷ Zheng Bijian, “China’s “Peaceful Rise” to Great-Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 84 no. 5, September / October 2005, p. 22.

³⁸ Zhou Y (2004) *China’s Diplomacy*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, p. 167.

adherence to international law, respect for human rights”³⁹. This liberal order “insists upon the inexorable eradication of difference between international system’s constituent units”⁴⁰, thus demanding a certain amount of insight into the domestic affairs of states by external actors. If we focus on China’s behaviors and actions, we notice that most of its behaviors which are non-compliant with the international order are in fact non-compliant with the liberal-based norms. Beijing is, by contrast, a steady defender of the Westphalia-based norms: for example, it contributes largely to the United Nations⁴¹ – in terms of budget or troops for peace operations. Additionally, its military does not engage in foreign interventions, and Chinese leaders usually condemn foreign interventions in third countries. As a consequence, we argue that China’s goal is to reform the international system by using a rhetoric of ‘rectification’, defending and emphasizing the norms which stem mainly from the Westphalia-based system – although it also takes a number of norms from the liberal system. Thus, while we can say that China has been socialized successfully into the system, as it has integrated and now supports most of its basic norms, it also aims at reshaping certain aspect of the system, by putting forth state sovereignty and non-intervention while rejecting other norms of the system, for example the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea or “most aspects of the international human-rights order”⁴².

3. A network of patronage relations

Beijing contends that regional leadership in Asia falls under the responsibility of Asians – “Matters in Asia ultimately must be taken care of by Asians, Asia's problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians, and Asia's security ultimately must be protected by Asians”⁴³ – not long after former Secretary of State Clinton pointed out the need for a US pivot/rebalancing to Asia⁴⁴. China interprets its own past in such a way that its historical narratives bring it in direct opposition to the West: China aims at erasing the “Century of Humiliations” and revive its former status, in particular in Asia. This can be seen particularly in the recent declarations by President Xi Jinping on the Chinese Dream or the rejuvenation of the Chinese civilization. These discourses confirm that China expects its status to be at least that of regional leader: “Certain non-Asian powers, through forming alliances and cliques with some Asian countries, have constantly interfered in the balance and cooperation of Asia”⁴⁵. Yet Beijing defends, as pointed out above, that it is emerging in a non-traditional non-threatening way. For example, President Xi stated that “China is the first country to make partnership-

³⁹ Peter Harris, “Losing the International Order: Westphalia, Liberalism and Current World Crises”, *The National Interest*, 10 November 2015, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/losing-the-international-order-westphalia-liberalism-current-14298?page=show>.

⁴⁰ Peter Harris, “Losing the International Order”.

⁴¹ The UN is, in its essence, the international organization within which each state is equal to one another.

⁴² Fontaine and Rapp-Hooper.

⁴³ Xi Jinping speaking at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, cited in “China president speaks out on security ties in Asia”, BBC News, 21 May 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27498266>.

⁴⁴ Hillary Clinton, “America's Pacific Century”, *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

⁴⁵ Xi Jinping speaking at the CICA.

building a principle guiding state-to-state relations”⁴⁶, thus emphasizing the importance that Beijing places on sovereign equality.

Yet its rise, whether peaceful or not, places China in a position of regional, and ultimately global, prominence. While Chinese leaders contend that the country’s development will in fact benefit other countries, the strategies and foreign policy tools devised and implemented highlight the setting-up of a network of patronage relations, with China as a (non-declared) patron. This is no new ambition: if we look at the country’s past from 1368 to 1840, the Tributary System was a system in which “the suzerain center enjoyed its authority in recognizing the legitimacy of the substates, but it never interfered unless a substate declared war on another member of the family of All-under-Heaven” (*Tianxia*)⁴⁷. As Teufel Dreyer notes, the philosophy of *Tianxia* is perceived through the rhetorical use of harmony, peaceful rise, Chinese dreams, that have characterize political discourse by Chinese leaders in the last decades⁴⁸: “this project (*Tianxia*) is the cornerstone of Chinese conception of political system”⁴⁹. The underlying philosophy of *Tianxia* is used to highlight the benevolence of China’s power. The revival of this philosophy in the current political setting calls for a deeper analysis of its values and principles, thus enabling greater understanding of the philosophy underpinning Chinese grand strategy. First, *Tianxia* has three meanings: (1) a geographical meaning, thus referring to all the territories “under heaven”; (2) a common and universal agreement of all people; (3) a global political system which, dominated by a single institution, brings peace and order⁵⁰: “*Tianxia* is a concept that takes care of the whole world, believing in and aiming at a harmonious whole”⁵¹. *Tianxia* is thus not about eliminating relations of domination or imperialism; rather, it presupposes that world peace can only be achieved through the establishment of one single global institution which dominates the entire world; substates are however independent with regards to their internal economy, culture, norms, or social values. They lose this independence vis-à-vis their legitimacy and political duties; yet “this universal government will lose its legitimacy if it betrays or abuses its responsibilities; as a consequence, revolution will be justified”⁵². In that sense, the *Tianxia* system establishes that one central authority dominates all other so-called substates and guarantees the harmony of world order: this authority, in essence a world government, is “in charge of universal institutions, laws and world order, controlling shared resources such as water and minerals, with the authority to recognize the legitimacy of sub-states, supervise the social and political conditions therein, and to lead punitive expeditions when the sub-state or sub-states’ actions contravene/s universal law and

⁴⁶ “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, Keynote address by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations office in Geneva on January 18, 2017, *Xinhua*, 19 January 2017.

⁴⁷ Zhao Tingyang, “Rethinking Empire from the Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (*Tianxia*, 天下)”, in William A. Callahan and Elena Barabantseva (eds.), *China Orders the World. Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*, Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011, p. 28.

⁴⁸ June Teufel Dreyer, “The ‘*Tianxia* Trope’: will China change the international system?”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2015.

⁴⁹ Zhao Tingyang, “La philosophie du *tianxia*”, *Diogenes*, vol. 221, no. 1, 2008, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Zhao Tingyang, “La philosophie du *tianxia*”, *Diogenes*, vol. 221, no. 1, 2008, p. 11.

⁵¹ Yaqing Qin, “Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?”, in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations Theory Perspectives on and beyond Asia*, New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 43.

⁵² Zhao Tingyang, “La philosophie du *tianxia*”, *Diogenes*, vol. 221, no. 1, 2008, p. 10-11.

order”⁵³. Tianxia supposes a certain amount of political subordination from substates vis-à-vis the central authority, but justifies rebellion if the latter fails to deliver on its responsibilities, hence calling its legitimacy into question.

As applied to contemporary China, Tianxia is transposed in a nation-states-based system and understood as a network of states which subordinate their political legitimacy to the central authority that is China. Yet the very philosophy of Tianxia establishes the limits of China’s domination as interlinked to respect and delivering of its responsibilities. The centrality of harmony conditions the connection among substates and people, establishing “mutual dependence and reciprocal improvement, as perfect integration of diversity”⁵⁴. Contrary to the American-led world order, domination of the central authority is established through a more benevolent exercise of power, although Tianxia does not exclude the use of force to integrate outsiders to the political system⁵⁵. In the current US-led hierarchy, one of the cornerstone of American global strategy is to establish a network of partnerships and alliances which work in favor of American national interest, most notably by amplifying US projection of power, securing trade routes, address security challenges which require a collective management. Washington’s alliance network is at the core of its global leadership strategy. It is also the centerpiece of US-led international socialization process which aims to perpetuate the current hierarchical order by maintaining the US at the top of the pyramid⁵⁶. Despite Washington’s rhetorical commitment to sovereign equality, the order is maintained by the superiority-inferiority status of its members. In this setting, one specific type of bilateral relation stands out as particularly unequal: the patron-client relation. One could exemplify the difference between these two world order conceptions with the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. The first one, more akin to the Chinese Tianxia, encompasses the followers’ ideas and motivations to encourage change in their thinking⁵⁷. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, “exchange a fixed quantity of existing resources with followers in order to negotiate their way or else they can expend their superior resources in order to impose their way”⁵⁸. The latter equates in this regard to an exchange process in which the leader is more susceptible to use coercive power; while the former aims at provoking a deep-rooted change in the target agent, thus corresponding more to a benevolent use of power.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to read in Tianxia philosophy a peaceful, harmonious and egalitarian alternative to the current dysfunction and inequality of the international order: “in current discussions of world order, it is popular to see traditional China as a benevolent and magnanimous empire that provided peace and stability for centuries before the arrival of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. This

⁵³ June Teufel Dreyer, “The ‘Tianxia Trope’: will China change the international system?”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2015, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Zhao Tingyang, “La philosophie du tianxia”, *Diogenes*, vol. 221, no. 1, 2008, p. 19.

⁵⁵ William A. Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?”, *International Studies Review* vol. 10, 2008, p. 749-761.

⁵⁶ The importance of this alliance network is paradoxically highlighted by the new Trump administration’s ignorance of its significance and disregard for allies.

⁵⁷ Steven Covey, *The Transformational Leadership Report*, 2007, www.transformationalleadership.net.

⁵⁸ *The New Psychology of Leadership Identity, Influence, and Power* (Ed.S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow), Psychology Press (Taylor&Francis Group), New York, 2011, p.37.

narrative is now used in Chinese and Western IR texts to explain why China is not a threat to world order in the twenty-first century⁵⁹. Yet such argument misses one of the points of China's socialization as "sinicizing its neighbors by resurrecting the age-old idea of acculturation-through-exposure or 'laihua (come and be transformed)' (Zhang, 2001: 55)"⁶⁰. As Callahan points out, the argument "that Tianxia is all-inclusive seems to miss the point that not everyone wants to be included"⁶¹. The political and identity plurality of the world appears indeed as a major obstacle to the instauration of any kind of 'world system' in the meaning of Immanuel Wallerstein – a diversity which is highlighted by the rise of nationalistic political tendencies.

Faced with these challenges but standing firm on its historical foundation and final objective, China is adapting its millennia-old philosophy to 'fit' the current system. In order to do so, we contend that it borrows some particularities of the patron-client framework to 'sinicize' it and establish a network of follower states that, although equally sovereign, would remain politically subordinate to China. Shoemaker and Spanier have developed the key characteristics of US-established patron-client interstate relations⁶²: (1) there must exist asymmetry between the military power of the states, with the patron largely more powerful than the client; (2) the client is pivotal in the patron's competition with a third state; (3) other actors in the international system are aware of the link between patron and client: "Because patron and client are in constant association with one another, the perception of a bond is created"⁶³. An additional characteristic of the patron-client relationship is that it is "primarily aimed at enhancing their respective security"⁶⁴. In its current Western understanding, patron-client relations revolve predominantly around security, the quintessential example of this type of relation being US-Israel. Yet Scott pointed out that the essence of these relations is first and foremost a voluntary and asymmetric exchange of benefits⁶⁵. Ciorciari thus notes that "the cultivation of patron-client ties (...) depend on the nature of the great power's capabilities, the strategic environment in which it operates, the norms governing its conduct, and the policies it asks weaker partners to follow as part of the deal"⁶⁶. China's power finds its source in both material and ideational factors: although it has a powerful military, it is nowhere near American military power which remains, to this day, far superior to any other military in the world. China has gained its power mainly through its economic growth. Beijing is today an inevitable partner for international trade. In 2015, it was the number one country in terms of merchandise export and number three for commercial services⁶⁷. The emergence of its economy

⁵⁹ William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?". *International Studies Review* vol. 10, 2008, p. 755.

⁶⁰ Emilian Kavalski, "Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China's Socialization of Central Asia", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol 45, no. 2, 2010, p. 133.

⁶¹ William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?". *International Studies Review* vol. 10, 2008, p. 756.

⁶² Shoemaker and Spanier, 1984,

⁶³ Christopher Carney, "International Patron-Client Relationships: A Conceptual Framework", *Studies in Comparative International Development* vol. 24 no. 2, 1989, p. 46.

⁶⁴ Shoemaker and Spanier, 1984, p. 14.

⁶⁵ James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 66 no. 1, 1972, p. 91–113

⁶⁶ John D. Ciorciari, "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* vol. 15 no. 2, 2015, p. 247.

⁶⁷ Those number exclude intra-EU trade. World Trade Organization, "China Trade Profile".

has led many other countries to turn to China to benefit from this growth. Ideationally, as China rises, it increasingly represents an alternative for those countries dissatisfied with the US-led international order. Yet as indicated above, the preponderance of American military might makes it difficult to overtly challenge Washington – and we find no evidence that China aims at doing so⁶⁸. Operating in an unstable environment that includes states distrustful of Chinese policies and have deep-rooted partnerships or alliances with Washington, Beijing is limited in the establishing security-based relations; not to mention its own aloofness at committing itself security-wise to avoid being dragged into an unwanted conflict⁶⁹. The discourse of China’s model of patron-client relations relies primarily on the economic factor, completed by political support and military assistance – even in the case of relations which are primarily rooted in security support. . It is essential that this carefully calculated strategy does not appear for China’s partners as entering into a relation of subordination, since “China’s ‘char offensive’ depends on convincing neighbors that Beijing will be neither a menacing foe nor an overbearing friend”⁷⁰. Hence the emphasis put on economic ties is a discursive tool to alleviate fears of too-heavy Chinese involvement among weaker states and to divert American concerns over their security network

4. China’s exercise of benevolent power towards Pakistan

China’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Pakistan can be grouped into three dominant areas: (1) counter the rise of India as regional leader; (2) strategic location of Pakistan for China’s economic development, including but not limited to access to energy resources; (3) guarantee stability to stabilize and develop the provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet, in particular avoid any spillover of Islamist ideology in Xinjiang which might feed into separatist movements. From these policy orientations, the geostrategic potential of Pakistan for economic investments seems to have taken precedence over the others in the past years.

Yet the absence of cultural and historical ties between Pakistan and China would seem at first glance a weak foothold in China’s overall strategy of sinicizing its Western neighbor. Thus, instead of building upon a commonality of traditional and historical values and norms, Beijing’s policies vis-à-vis Islamabad attest to the use of benevolent power, building upon several decades of mutual interests and anti-Indian sentiments in the region. In Pakistan, the CPEC project has become the epitome of China’s benevolent power and socialization efforts, most notably because of the excitable headlines that it has resulted in. The 46-billion-dollars-project involving agriculture, infrastructures, industry and fiber-optic connectivity seems to illustrate how China’s exercise of power is established in the region. CPEC is part of the larger “One Belt, One Road” project, more recently rebranded the “Belt Road Initiative”, and labelled by

⁶⁸ A keen observer will note that the situation in the South China Sea, where Chinese and American interests clash, might prove the author wrong at least in this region. For a more detailed look into this situation and its specificities, see Struye de Swielande 2012 and 2014.

⁶⁹ Michael R. Chambers, “Dealing by a Truculent Ally: A Comparative Perspective on China's Handling of North Korea”, *Journal of East Asian Studies* vol. 5 no. 1, 2005, p. 35–75

⁷⁰ John D. Ciorciari, “A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* vol. 15 no. 2, 2015, p. 249.

China's President the "project of the century"⁷¹. CPEC, as one part of the OBOR initiative, is important not only for its potential economic impact, but because it participates in inducing "snowballing perceptions of inevitability about the future of a China-led economic order in Asia"⁷². Nonetheless, the history of relations between the two neighbors holds a strong political and security dimension, and "for a long time the story of the economic relationship between the two sides has been one of excitable headlines touting large numbers, ports, pipelines, and energy transit routes followed by frustration, disappointment, stalled projects, and much smaller figures buried in statistical reports"⁷³. The "trade across the roof of the world"⁷⁴ has remained an economic metaphor for its geographical location: impressive from the outside, but very sparsely populated, difficult accessible, and subject to long periods of storms.

If it is rather evident to understand how Pakistan benefits from its close ties with China, the reverse is more difficult to grasp. Small rightly argues that "China's policy sees a strong, capable Pakistan as an asset to China in its own right"⁷⁵. In fact, we could paraphrase the author in asserting that Beijing sees a disruptive Western Indian neighbor as an asset in its own right. Although the whole story is not there, it is certainly a fair start: "the most important service Pakistan provides (to China) is its mere existence"⁷⁶. Shoemaker and Spanier highlight that "the more advantage a patron gains over its competitor through its association with its client, the more the patron will value the relationship, often in direct contradiction to the material benefits the patron derives"⁷⁷.

Despite China having never actually intervened militarily in a conflict in favor of Pakistan (although the prospects seemed real in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war), its regular military assistance has formed the basis of China's status as Pakistan's "all-weather friend". Pakistani leaders show unwavering certainty that China will support them no matter what⁷⁸. Beyond the series of examples that illustrate (or not) this matter of fact lies the Pakistani perception that China respects and protects Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. High-ranked public servants thus point out that the United States always expects something from Pakistan, no matter at what cost for Pakistan's national interests. China never does; it comes with projects and ideas which benefit the country.

This discourse is particularly well-received among Pakistani elites and the population. Indeed, central to Pakistan's national role conceptions is the expectation that its core functional roles as a state be enforced: territorial integrity and sovereignty are major issues of concern to Pakistani decision-makers and its military⁷⁹, who have accused Washington of violating their sovereignty several times in the history of the bilateral

⁷¹ "Xi Jinping Positions China at Center of New Economic Order", *New York Times*, 14 May 2017.

⁷² Ely Ratner and Samir Kumar, "The United States is Losing Asia to China", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017.

⁷³ Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Gurgaon, Random House India, 2015, p. 96.

⁷⁴ Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Gurgaon, Random House India, 2015.

⁷⁵ Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Gurgaon, Random House India, 2015, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Jonah Blank, "Thank You for Being a Friend", *Foreign Affairs*, 15 October 2015.

⁷⁷ Shoemaker & Spanier, 1984: 13.

⁷⁸ Interviews by the author, Islamabad and Lahore, March-April 2016.

⁷⁹ Interviews by the author, March-April 2016, Islamabad.

relations⁸⁰. Hence the Chinese discourse of peaceful rise and defense of the norm of sovereignty finds strong support among the Pakistani establishment⁸¹. The political support that Beijing has shown is expressed through positions that China takes at the United Nations in favor of Pakistan. For example, Jamaat-ud-Dawa was added on the UN Security Council's list of terrorist organization in December 2008, after China had used its veto three times to block the resolution, on "technical holds" at Pakistan's request. Likewise, Beijing blocked New Delhi's bid to question Pakistan on the release of Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi in June 2015. Facing a Western collectivity of states highly suspicious of Pakistan elites' willingness to seriously tackle the issue of terrorism and radicalization in their country, China's ambassador to India from 2014 to 2016 Le Yu Cheng declared in an interview with the Indian press that "Pakistan is also a victim of terrorism"⁸².

China's military assistance to Pakistan reinforces this perception that Beijing takes positions which protect and support Pakistan's sovereignty. The cornerstone of their military ties is their collaboration in nuclear technology, and China's support in the development of Pakistan's nuclear capacity. Because the "autonomy and even survival" (of Pakistan) as a state have been preserved by its nuclear capacity⁸³, the collaboration that Beijing has offered in this area has been interpreted in Islamabad as evidence of China's commitment to Pakistani sovereignty and strategic equality with India. This view is reinforced by Washington's application of conditionality in its foreign policy, which the 2009 Kerry-Lugar bill illustrated. Of course, reinforcing itself, this cooperation on an issue as sensitive as nuclear development has had a beneficial effect on the mutual trust that the two countries have in one another. In addition to providing actual support, China's policy sends the signal to Pakistan that it does not support its exclusion from the 'nuclear club', thus increasing its power of attraction and positive image in the Pakistani elites' mind. In this case, we can establish that the exercise of benevolent power is reinforced by the power of attraction of China's anti-American stand and its discourse on rectification of the international system.

Notwithstanding the benevolent exercise of power of China towards Pakistan, the puzzle of the asymmetry between the two countries remain: is Pakistan, as one Chinese general put is, China's Israel?⁸⁴ In other words, is Pakistan China's client state? Against this argument, one can point to the fact that despite the close ties that the two countries maintain, Pakistan keeps looking West for the validation of its status and policies. From Beijing's perspective, however, the decision-making outcome shows a different picture. Consistent with China's main foreign policy tool and prominent capacity to establish patronage relations, the most apparent form of ties being strengthened with Pakistan are economic. Although it was only in 2011 that China made it to Pakistan's top five trade partner, it has remained there ever since.

⁸⁰ One of the most illuminating examples in the recent years being the May 2011 Abbottabad raid, which started a series of incidents raising the tensions high between the two countries.

⁸¹ Interestingly, discussions with Pakistani civil society actors showed a different picture, as they appear more reserved and wary of China's policy vis-à-vis their country, usually wondering what is China's real endgame in Pakistan.

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Chinese Ambassador Le Yucheng's Interview with PTI", 17 September 2014.

⁸³ Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Gurgaon, Random House India, 2015, p. 44.

⁸⁴ General Xiong Guangkai, cited in Mohan Malik, "The China Factor in the India-Pakistan Conflict", *Parameters* vol. 33, no. 1, 2003, p. 42.

The 2007 Free Trade agreement is evidence of the two countries' willingness to improve their economic ties. Yet Beijing is aware of Islamabad's heavy reliance on Washington security-wise; in fact, the Pakistani military shows no sign to bifurcate in China's direction in this regard, a situation which suits the latter. Nonetheless, by announcing a massive investment project in Pakistan, the CPEC, China behaves coherently with its strategy of patronage relations and puts the emphasis of the China-Pakistan relations on economic ties, despite the reality of the relation being situated in other domains. Moreover, despite the announcement of CPEC being a game changer for Pakistan's economy, the latest details of this safely guarded and highly opaque plan appear "to be molded to favor Chinese interests while placing Pakistan's interests at the periphery"⁸⁵. This conclusion, if proven right, is concordant with underlying dynamics of patron-client relations in that, in spite of short and medium-term advantages for the client, they ultimately favor the patron.

5. Conclusion

Despite the argument being made in this paper that the China-Pakistan relation is an example of how Beijing exercises benevolent power to establish a network of patronage relations, in no way does the author provide a judgement on this policy. The literature is rather fast in taking the American side or the Chinese side – would a China-led international system be better/more egalitarian than the current US-led one. Our objective in this article has been to provide an alternative view on China's socialization efforts, in that sense putting this research in the continuation of Kavalski's 2010 article on China's socialization agency in Central Asia.

Our main argument is that China is making a benevolent use of its power, both because of normative conviction and strategic calculations. The very definition of China's strategic narrative and ultimate goal places the country as the central authority in an otherwise equality-based community of states, the Tianxia system. In doing so, China defines its foreign policy so as to socialize its neighbors and partners into its world view. It does so by increasing the benefits that these countries can gain through economic-based announcement effects underpinned by institutional efforts: setting up of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, reinforcement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, etc. Nonetheless, to avoid being perceived as a direct competitor of the United States and a revisionist state, China minimizes security ties and remains cautious in its foreign military commitments. Beijing's strategy towards Pakistan illustrates in that sense the efforts that the former puts into asserting itself as a benevolent regional leader through normative power.

⁸⁵ Umair Jamal, "Understanding China's 'Master Plan' for Pakistan", *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2017. The most extensive details that have been publicly released on the CPEC project were published on May 15, 2017, by *Dawn*, Pakistan's leading English newspaper. Yet officials have challenged these pieces of information as false and/or not complete. In other words, at the time when this paper is written, the full plan has not been disclosed yet.