

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In his speech during the centenary anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party of China on 1 July, 2021, President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China (PRC) said in his speech that after the Chinese civilization had endured intense humiliation, national “rejuvenation” had always been the greatest “dream” of his people and nation. The statement and the words “dream” and “rejuvenation” were repeated several times throughout in similar wording, emphasizing that China—not as a state, but as a civilization, is not yet satisfied with their progress; That, despite having come a long way to becoming the world's second largest economy after the United States of America (USA) around 2010, it has yet to achieve its ‘dream’ and completely rejuvenate after the 100 years of humiliation.

China identifies itself as more of a civilization-state, one that western definitions of a state simply do not encapsulate the entirety of its functions and modus operandi; A nation that is highly attached to its far past¹. This is part of what drives Xi Jinping's foreign policy, as he takes into consideration that China is not a new nation, but a nation that has lost its momentum in the world, and that its former glory from centuries ago is to be rightfully restored.

The PRC has in recent years rapidly developed under the Communist Party of China (CCP), making it a key player in China's development. On July 1921, the CCP was established, and China had undergone several leaderships, from

¹ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

Paramount leaders Mao Zedong (1949-1976), followed by Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989), Jiang Zemin (1989-2004), Hu Jintao (2004-2012) and currently, Xi Jinping, whose leadership seems to be riddled with interest and burdened by legacies of past leaders—One that seems to breed insecurity, leading to an aggression that his predecessors did not previously opt for.

Xi Jinping inherited a thriving China well-projected in terms of development from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao; The nation started opening up its economy around 1978, and since then, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has averaged around 10 percent per annum, with 800 million of its previously impoverished people from Mao Zedong's era lifted out of poverty as well as improved access to public goods such as education and health². The PRC's incumbent leader was bequeathed a China well on its way towards its best since the late sixties. His actions would denote the path the civilization-state would take and its place in the international stage—An overwhelming pressure to perform and provide, riddled with insecurities³.

“We have realized the first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects....We are now marching in confident strides toward the second centenary goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects. This is a great and glorious accomplishment for the Chinese nation, for the Chinese people, and for the Communist Party of China!” -Xi Jinping, Centenary anniversary of the CCP, July 2021

Xi Jinping continued what his predecessors had started with more vigour while attempting to realise the “second centenary goal”. His grand strategy could be said to be marred with active pursuit and persistent use of force that previous leaders have been observed to be reluctant to use, with the exception of Taiwan

² World Bank, "China Overview", 2021.

³ Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Strait concerns, to which all leaders reacted sensitively on. Xi Jinping's foreign policies and actions have displayed greater assertiveness, especially visible in the South China Sea, the grandiose of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). 'Xi Jinping thought,' can be said to be the continuation of the cumulative aspirations of Deng Xiaoping's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', Jiang Zemin's 'Three Represents', and Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development. Yet, his leadership is distinct due to several factors to be elaborated on: i) greater and more audacious use of military force, ii) the utilisation of personality as a weapon, and iii) The use of Confucianism and a stress on common ideology among the people.

The use of force towards external matters by previous leaders before Xi Jinping was avoided. Yet in the current landscape, it is evident that maritime conflicts and confrontations are more frequent and of a greater scale than before, border issues with India have intensified, with as much as a hundred People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers reported to have had crossed the Line Actual Control at Baharoti as recent as October 2021⁴. Showcases of military grandeur occur often, a recent display would be the conclusion of their first multinational peacekeeping exercise on September 2021, displaying their military prowess, operability and cooperation when troops from Pakistan, Mongolia and Thailand joined the PLA exercise in Henan⁵. Xi Jinping makes it clear to the world that his

⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, "Is Another 'Friction Point' Emerging Along the India-China Border?", *The Diplomat*, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-another-friction-point-emerging-along-the-india-china-border/>.

⁵ Lun Tian Yew, "China Shows Off Defence Diplomacy with Multinational Peacekeeping Drill", *Reuters*, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-shows-off-defence-diplomacy-with-multinational-peacekeeping-drill-2021-09-15/>.

people are not to be toyed, that China has become a nation that is strong both economically and in a military sense, but seeks to maintain an image that does not aim for hegemony but of benevolence.

Military build-up and fears of further attrition between the two great powers the PRC and USA certainly concerns the entire international community. If anything, they are most cautious of each other. The highest contested area of the current times is the Indo-Pacific, a highly populated area consisting of a majority of middle to low income developing countries, the countries included in this “Indo-Pacific” framework varies from country to country, but Southeast Asia stands as a core. This region appears to be the epicentre of conflict hotspots between the two powers. The US has qualms on Chinese “provocative” military activities around Taiwan, labelling it “destabilising” and “undermining” regional stability and peace, reprimands have occurred for years, yet China insists in its claim to Taiwan⁶. China also urges the US to participate in talks with Russia to prevent an outer space arms race that has now come under concerns to the PRC, yet the US has so far refused participation⁷. This displays the adamantness of both the PRC and the US.

To address the second point on cult personality, it is appropriate to address Xi Jinping’s origins and how he came into power. “*This country is its people; the people are the country,*” Xi Jinping mentioned during the CCP centenary speech,

⁶ Ben Blanchard, "U.S. Condemns 'Provocative' Chinese Activities Near Taiwan", *Reuters*, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/39-aircraft-china-sets-new-high-taiwan-defence-zone-incursion-2021-10-02/>.

⁷ Laura Zhou, "China Urges US To Join Talks on Preventing Arms Race in Outer Space", *South China Morning Post*, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3150580/china-urges-us-join-talks-preventing-arms-race-outer-space>.

and it is this image of dedication towards the people that he has projected domestically. Having experienced the Cultural Revolution as a teenager, he was a victim of the Mao years as everyone else was; His father was denounced by the Red Guards, lost a sister amid the mayhem and was sent to the farms in *Shaanxi* for rural labour, separated from his family, and losing the privilege he was once born with. One would think that those years of horrible living conditions would make him spite the CCP, yet doing the people's work was what honed him and his perspectives—what one could say solidified his current status in the CCP—thus making the openness of his personality of great importance as many authors and China observers have noted⁸.

Within China, Xi Jinping is renowned as a princeling, who rose through the ranks of the CCP Post-Mao Zedong, with a strong anti-corruption campaign as he deemed corruption the greatest plague an elite-driven Chinese society had; he rooted out even big shots in the CCP and PLA members, risking dissatisfaction from powerful people, yet the development of a cult personality thwarted this. He mingled among the masses, his story of growing in hardship inspired, he shared his hobbies and what he loves to read, encouraged the reading of the Analects. His image was made as such that he not only understands the people—but is one of them, and that in selflessness, his endeavours in the party will be for the people. This is in contrary to his three predecessors who divulged very little of their personal lives to the public. In this aspect, he is actually in most likeness to Mao—

⁸ Khan, *Haunted by Chaos*.

having similar visions of even Mao's "5 Principles of China's Foreign Relations" and methods of domestic surveillance. Recently, with the return of children to school post pandemic recoveries, a renewed education system seeks to filter out course materials that are politically unacceptable⁹; Yet, in their parallel ambitions to steer the PRC away from the image of "the Sick Man of Asia" and recovery from the century of humiliation¹⁰, Xi Jinping has seemingly learned and improvised on Mao's methods and perceived Confucianism as cement to the CCP's authority instead of a threat, bringing us to the third point of difference.

Confucianism is being popularized again domestically in the PRC and this paper will prove the ways and degrees to which it has been a guiding post of Xi Jinping's foreign policies. Xi Jinping has repeatedly quoted the Analects in several instances to solidify his public statements and responses, and even advocates a form of Chinese capitalism that differs from that of the West, that functions on "true" meritocracy; A form of "freedom" that some consider twisted. In an international conference in 2014 to exemplify, he had elaborated that the theme of the conference was "Confucianism: World Peace and Development", directly hinting at his belief as a basis for his foreign policy¹¹. Xi even has a book titled, "How to read Confucius and other Chinese Classical Thinkers" that highly encourages studies on Confucianism.

⁹ Huizhong Wu, "In Echo of Mao Era, China's Schools in Book-Cleansing Drive", *Reuters*, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-books-insight-idUKKBN24A1RK>.

¹⁰ Xing Lu, *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People* Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017.

¹¹ Jin Kai, "The Chinese Communist Party's Confucian Revival", *TheDiplomat.Com*, Last modified 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/the-chinese-communist-partys-confucian-revival/>.

There is first a need to understand the nature of Confucianism. The Chinese word for religion is *zōngjiào* (宗教), which in itself is a relatively new concept that was borrowed from Japanese *shūkyō*. Confucianism is not a religion per se as the western world understands it to be, *zōngjiào* simply means ‘sect teaching’ and the concept of it had been foreign to China before the 20th century. Confucianism comes under ‘*zōngjiào*’, serving more as a collection of moral teachings that remain relevant and applicable today, and is practiced in the lives of most Chinese people. Though many may argue that Confucianism is more of an ethical guide, the political aspect of it remains stark, especially in the Mencian discourse in later years.¹² When we refer to Confucianism now, it mostly refers to neo-Confucianism, an encapsulation of the Analects and documented sayings of Confucius which continued to later in the centuries, including teachings of the Way to Mencian teachings until the Han dynasty wherein it finally became a state ideology. This is the one that we will refer to, and not just the classical court chronicles of *Lún yǔ* (論語) as the one that is prevalent in Chinese society currently is this form¹³. We will emphasize the Main Cardinal Virtues of Confucianism as a basis for Xi Jinping’s leadership in foreign policy.

Confucianism in China has experienced its ups and downs. One of its closest chances at a purge from China was in the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the assumption of Mao Zedong’s chairmanship of the CCP, wherein

¹² Cheng-tian Kuo, *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies* Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

¹³ Dingxin Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Confucianism was labelled as one of the purged “Four Olds”—customs, habits, cultures and ideas. The Red Guard burned temples, banned traditions and forced religious clerics into submission under Maoism to solidify Communist Practices and authority. This has been noted by several scholars as the decline of Confucianism in China.

The efforts to rid China of Confucianism by Mao seem ineffective as it resurged, and currently, under Xi Jinping, it is being promoted greatly instead, mentioned and advocated in several of his speeches. Confucianism is a theme that recurs in his speeches.

Confucianism is innate within the people of the PRC, originating from their long and rich history. A stress on communal endeavours that encourages self-cultivation can be said to have driven the recent technological advancements. The state and everyone in it are a “family” to which Confucius iterates on the importance of the parent-child filial piety relationships, the roles that exist for everyone must be fulfilled, and deeds reciprocated; The capitalist economic system China adopts is that of Chinese-tailored socialism and the adoption of Confucianism can serve as a shield from Western ideals of democracy that the CCP perceives as pernicious to the true vision of prosperity while further consolidating legitimacy domestically¹⁴. More often than not, domestic policies reflect foreign ones. Therefore, to understand the basis for Xi Jinping’s foreign policy and the American response is to understand how China perceives the world and its position in it.

¹⁴ Michael Schuman, "The Chinese President’s Love Affair with Confucius Could Backfire on Him", *Time*, 2014, <https://time.com/3547467/china-beijing-xi-jinping-confucius-communism/>.

The crux of this issue of difference in beliefs and ideas lies in the contestation this great nation has with another, the US. They contest in various fields, and tension in recent years between them has been on the rise in three particular fields, the US is particularly most vocal about these three issues that this paper will discuss: 1) China's military activity over the South China Sea and its influence in the Indo-Pacific area, and 2) Chinese political control over its citizens and its lack of regard for human rights and democratic free speech, especially in regards to Hong Kong and Taiwan¹⁵, and 3) The Belt and Road Initiative. This paper shall examine the extent to which China utilises its Confucian strategic culture in regards to these two issues in particular, and ultimately, 4) how these issues and China's foreign actions have affected its relationship with the US in recent years during Xi Jinping's era.

The US has had a history that is far different from that of China's, and this seems to be the start of their rivalry. The former is known to be advocates of democracy, human rights, freedom of speech and of the rule of law and concepts of nation-states and sovereignty. China, however, does not identify with the principles of nation-state, but that of a civilisation-state that stretches back to hundreds of years¹⁶; Honed from hardship and instability that originated from within and externally. The US have had a comparably shorter history, one that consisted of winning most wars and is surrounded by safe oceans and allies. China has only ever been surrounded by enemies lurking from all corners, as well as a history of being

¹⁵ Robert Sutter, "Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump-Pragmatism Fails As US-China Differences Rise in Prominence", *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 69-85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44759210>.

¹⁶ Jacques, *When China Rules the World*

beaten down and of constant struggling. Xiaoyu Pu, in *One Mountain, Two Tigers*, explains that Sino-US tensions are not exactly focused on a security dilemma, but exhibiting a status dilemma wherein they mutually fear that the other is aiming for regional domination. A lack of proper communication of intentions is deficient, especially with the perceived competition for hegemony in Asia. China is observed to use economic utility and undergirds a historical Chinese benign Confucian China; However, recent Chinese assertion has incited US complaints for its rogue actions, yet many say that this very backlash is what incites further fortification of China's "bubble" and overprotection of itself.¹⁷ Further alarming the need to understand the basis of Chinese foreign policy to respond appropriately so as to not incite further tension and fragility of relations.

During Obama's time, President Xi Jinping was viewed as the more assertive and powerful leader in comparison to Obama, because he rarely criticized China during his first term in office. He only began to be more vocal about it in 2014; Not that he was unfettered by China, but because he highlighted instead, the success of US-Sino relations that had progressed in comparison and focused on areas where their agendas and cooperation aligned, such as that on global issues of energy efficiency and pollution, thus facilitating US-China agreements, the Obama administration was wary of risking China cutting off positive interchange. 2015 was the turning point straining their relations, particularly due to Obama's exertion of stronger pressure to stop Chinese cyber theft and to agree to international sanctions

¹⁷ Xiaoyu Pu, "One Mountain, Two Tigers: China, The United States, and the Status Dilemma n The Indo-Pacific", *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (2019): 25-40, doi:10.1353/asp.2019.0033.

against North Korea, as well as South China Sea matters,¹⁸ bringing forth one of the major policy contestations between the two great powers.

China's "nine-dash" line historical claims to the South China Sea had been around for a long time, but with the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, conflict with numerous nations arose, in particular the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Conflict escalated as China began building artificial islands around the Paracel and Spratly islands around 2013¹⁹. The clash lies in China's persistence in the claims, and the US' principle of Freedom of Navigation. Both accuse the other of unbecoming actions. The US sees its actions in the region as a threat and breach to the maritime security of its allies, such as Japan and the Philippines. China perceives the US presence in the waters as a constant threat that it has to be increasingly wary of²⁰.

One of the greatest competitions both countries are engaged in is also one of ideas, a field wherein this is fought over can be said to be the Republic of China (ROC), or Taiwan, and the recent riots in Hong Kong. The US has and always stand for the principles of democracy, self-determination and freedom of speech. The PRC perceives Taiwan to be a part of its mainland, and that reunification is eventual. Upon the incumbency of Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Party in Taiwan, cross-strait relations have been rockier than ever, with the US as involved. Tsai has

¹⁸ Sutter, "Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump-Pragmatism Fails As US-China Differences Rise in Prominence"

¹⁹ "Territorial Disputes in The South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker", Council on Foreign Relations, Last modified 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

²⁰ US 7th Fleet Public Affairs, "7Th Fleet Destroyer Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea" Paracel Islands: US Navy, 2021.

expressed the urgency of the threat democratic values are under by the expansion of authoritarian influence, those that share the same values must stand together to defend it to ensure the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region²¹, which aligns with the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific Outlook as it aims to deepen its relationship with Taiwan over Beijing's unsettling actions to 'bully' Taiwan with frequent military exercises in the region, economic pressure and its leash on Taiwan's participation in international organizations such as the World Health Organization and its efforts to ostracize its diplomatic partners away²².

US-China rivalry has stretched for years and even during the Covid-19 pandemic, information wars and vaccine diplomacy from both sides were on the rise. At the start of the fiasco, western media was even portraying China to be the origin and cause of the spread—President Trump even coined the term “Chinese Virus”²³, enmity was apparent. Upon the vaccine rollout, China was massively broadcasting their efforts in aiding nations struggling amid the pandemic, as they attempt to alter the negative perception that the first infections first originated from Wuhan²⁴.

This rivalry between the two great powers is thus worth examining, and it is evident that Xi Jinping's leadership is distinct from his predecessors, and is influential in the world order of today. He has indeed elevated the PRC to great heights, but being at that height makes it vulnerable to topple over. The PRC is

²¹ Tsai Ing-wen, "Copenhagen Democracy Summit Address", Speech, 2021.

²² US Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Shared Vision", 2019.

²³ Reuters, "Trump Calls Coronavirus The 'Chinese Virus'", 2020,
<https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idOVCSL4ESF>.

²⁴ Tessa Wong, "Covid: Is China's Vaccine Success Waning in Asia?", *BBC*, 2021,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57845644>.

currently at that stage, staggering at the top with the US, an insecurity between the two thus serves the importance in examining his foreign policy, not just through the conventional lens of western values, but as well as from a home-brewed eastern perspective of Confucianism as socially constructed within China and towards the its international peers.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of this research introduced above, the author suggests the following research questions to be answered in the thesis:

1. How does Confucianism affect China's Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping?
2. How does it affect China's relations with the US?

1.3 Research Objectives

This research's objective is to discover the correlations between Confucianism on society and thus Xi Jinping's foreign policy during his administration. The actions in the international stage are never without scrutiny and judgement from the states' peers and therefore, perceptions of China in recent years have shifted and differed. The strongest opinions coming from its rival the US and thus this paper also seeks to explore how Xi Jinping with his Confucian beliefs has affected China's relationship with the US. The research has an objective of finding out the aforementioned and what makes China and the US' opinions so strong and differing towards each other, and along the way attempt to find common grounds that the polar opposites can mutually understand. The outcome of this research would provide an analysis on how Confucianism influences Xi Jinping's Foreign

policy and thus how it has affected US-China relations during Xi Jinping's administration.

1.4 Research Significance

The result of this writing will focus on giving an elaboration on the foundational reasonings behind Xi Jinping's international conduct and strategy as well as how this appears in the eyes of western-ideologically driven politicians, in particular, Confucianism. This research will not give a bias to which perspective is 'right' or 'wrong' but merely enlighten readers on the powerful impact that long-lived beliefs and the background of the nation's leader not only cement their habits of governance but also reflect in how they present themselves to other states and interact with them. With the rise of China that seems to go toe-to-toe with America, a relationship that has always seem volatile seem to require examination not only from the practical methods commonly researched on the basis of profits and losses, but have the grand possibility of it rooting in a much more ingrained factor that exists in not only their bureaucracies, but also their people and societal conduct.

This research will attempt to explore the rationale behind Xi Jinping's foreign policy from a Confucian perspective as well as where Christian-dominated liberal rival of a United States' values would clash, and perhaps even find common-ground between the two. The latter possibility would be best as in such strained status quo, finding mutuality would turn the tables of violent conflict and provide opportunity for peace.

1.5. Structure of Writing

This thesis will begin by elaborating on the background of the topic, forming a foundation of basic understanding on the status quo of the topic and starting point that will contribute to answering the research questions and fulfil the significance and purpose of the research.

The second chapter will consist of two parts, the first being the literature review that will explain the sources used and how it will be utilised in the analysis between Xi Jinping's basis of foreign policy in connection to Confucianism and how it has affected Sino-US relations. The second part of this chapter will explore the theories in regards to the topic which are foreign policy analysis, clash of civilisations and national identity.

The third chapter of this thesis will discuss the methodology of explaining the research, including the research method, the data collection technique and data analysis technique to gather information for this research.

The fourth chapter will be the highlight of the paper as it will entail and encapsulate all the data that has been collected in a systematic manner while keeping in mind the theories and concepts in a systematic manner.

The fifth chapter will conclude the data and analysis, the results of the research will also include a recommendation for future researched when analysing the issue on Xi Jinping's foreign policy and its implications on Sino-US relations.