

Fareed Zakaria: China's growing clout



Chinese President Xi Jinping speak to reporters during a press conference at the Great Hall of the People (GHOP) in Beijing, China, 12 November 2014.

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As Moscow continues to send its forces into Ukraine, it seems clear that Vladimir Putin's Russia presents the United States and the West with a frontal challenge. But in the longer run, it is not Russia's overt military assault but China's patient and steady non-military moves that pose the larger challenge. Russia is a great power in decline. Its economy amounts to just 3.4 percent of global gross domestic product. China's is nearly 16 percent and rising, now almost four times the size of Japan's and five times that of Germany, according to the World Bank.

Presidents Obama and Xi Jinping deserve the accolades they are receiving for their historic agreement on climate change, which suggests that the United States and China are moving toward a new, productive relationship. Except that, even while negotiating this accord, Xi's government has been laying down plans for a very different foreign policy — one that seeks to replace the American-built post-1945 international system with its own. There is clearly a debate going on in Beijing, but if China continues down this path, it would constitute the most significant and dangerous shift in international politics in 25 years.

It has been widely reported that Xi has presided over a rise in nationalist rhetoric in recent years, much of it anti-American. This is true, but that rhetoric had never gone away. Even in the far more placid Hu Jintao years, one saw the rise of books like “The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era,” which explicitly called on Beijing to seek global primacy — replacing the United States — and provide the world with wiser and more benevolent leadership.

While nationalist rhetoric has been circulating in China for a while, the quantity does seem to have risen sharply. One count done by the Christian Science Monitor found that the number of anti-Western polemics in the official People’s Daily newspaper in 2014 has tripled, compared with the same period last year. Perhaps more important, however, is that China has begun a patient, low-key but persistent campaign to propose alternatives to the existing structure of international arrangements in Asia and beyond. There are those in Beijing who want to move from being anti-American to post-American.

This summer, China spearheaded an agreement with Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa (known collectively as the “BRICS” countries) to create a financial organization that would challenge the International Monetary Fund. In October, Beijing launched a \$50 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, explicitly as an alternative to the World Bank. And last week, Xi declared that China would spend \$40 billion to revive the old “Silk Road” trading route to promote development in the region. “As China’s overall national strength grows,” Xi said, “China will be both capable and willing to provide more public goods for the Asia-Pacific and the world.”

China producing more “public goods” — jargon for things that people need and enjoy but cannot pay for (like national parks or clean air) — would be a great step forward. But Beijing seems to want to fund goods in a way that replaces the existing international system rather than bolsters it. And in recent years, China has made determined efforts to exclude one nation from all its plans — the United States. It championed an “East Asia Summit,” a forum that would be free of American influence. (It didn’t work.) In May, Xi gave an important speech on Asian security at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, an obscure group on which Beijing lavished attention and whose chief merit appears to be the absence of American participation. In that speech, Xi said, “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia . . . and uphold the security of Asia.” There is, of course, only one country outside of Asia that clearly plays a central role in upholding the security of the region.

For China to fit into an existing system rubs against its deepest historical traditions. In his recent book, “World Order,” Henry Kissinger notes that China has never been comfortable with the idea of a global system of equal states: “[Historically] China considered itself, in a sense, the sole sovereign government of the world. . . . Diplomacy was not a bargaining process between multiple sovereign interests but a series of carefully contrived ceremonies in which foreign societies were given the opportunity to affirm their assigned place in the global hierarchy.” One in which China sat on top.

These are worrying signs not because Beijing’s efforts will surely succeed. They may not. Many of its plans have drawn opposition. But if China uses its growing clout to keep asking countries to choose between the existing arrangements or new ones, it might create conditions for a new kind of Cold War in Asia. It will certainly help to undermine and destroy the current international order, which has been a platform on which peace and prosperity have flourished in Asia for seven decades.
