

Speech

China and the Future of International Order

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Respected Dr. Robin Niblett, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you and I am honoured to talk here in Chatham House.

My host asked me to talk on the topic of “order”, with a special focus on Asia-Pacific, China-US relations and tensions in the South China Sea.

Before coming to the main topic, let me say how pleased I am to be back in London, and to breathe the familiarities in the air. During my years away from Britain, I maintained a keen interest in the progress in this country and continued to be impressed by how you bring economic recovery and how you addressing many difficult challenges.

I am amazed to see the ties between China and Britain growing stronger into a golden era. Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “super state” visit to Britain last October marked a major step forward in our relationship.

A lot is happening here and boring is not the word for Britain. Many of us in China were quite surprised when Brexit passed the referendum. Just as we were trying to understand the consequences, we were surprised again to learn that many here were already regretting it and wanted another referendum.

Now it is hard to predict how things will play out, but we all agree that the world is changing, raising many questions: Is this the beginning of disintegration of the European integration?

The most profound analysis I have read is by Doc Henry Kissinger who reminded people how Europe came out of the bitter fighting and rivalry and why and how European integration started in the first place. I think his call for unity even in the Brexit, so things don’t get out of hand is quite thought provoking.

Many are asking what China will gain or lose in this. I think China tends to look at the world from a long term point of view and our best interest lies with stable global growth. What China can say at this moment is that, we remain committed to close ties with the UK. We will also continue the policy of supporting EU’s integration.

Now let’s turn to our topic for today. The concerns often raised is: will China challenge the US led order to set up its own system.

Let me start by borrowing from Raymond Carver: what are we talking about when we talk about order?

It is commonly accepted in Britain and the west that the existing world order is built and led by the US, which is also known as “Pax Americana”. This order, as I see, contains three pillars: first, American or western values; second, the US led military alignment; third, the UN and its institutions. This world order has its roots in the history of international politics and also has its modern contributions. The United States, as the leader for this order system has also reaped great benefit from its leadership role.

But where does China stand v&v this world order? It is not hard to see, China is never fully embraced to this order system. Despite its tremendous progress, China has long been alienated politically by the western world. The US-led military alliance puts their interests above other's and pays little attention to China's security concerns. It is even asserting increasing security pressure on China in the Asia-Pacific these days.

In the meantime, viewed from a wider perspective, this world order system is also facing multiple challenges, not necessarily from China but more often because it can't offer solution to all problems in today's world, and sometime it even creating more problems.

Take for example, over the years, the global promotion of the western values is not always successful, especially in countries where new governing structures failed to grow fast enough to replace the original ones that were brought down. Chaos can occur and even spill over, which only reinforces disorder. When the war on terror was first launched, who would think terrorism would one day take semi state form? When the first sparkle of revolution erupted in the Arab World who would think one day Europe would be faced with millions of refugees.

While the old order structure is not in keeping with the time, globalization is changing the world, and also bringing challenges to its power structure.

Over the past decades, we have seen diffusion and shifting of capital, technology and market from the center of the developed world to the peripheries, where the less developed world picked up economic speed.

And now we start to see the decentralization of the world power along the same line. The newly rising developing countries are expected to participate more in the world affairs, and take more responsibility.

The diffusion of power is a reality in today's world. But, should it be allowed to lead to disorder of the world and why can't the international community move fast enough to re-shape the order structure?

China, as a rising country, is growingly aware of the rising international expectation as well as the weariness for its role. So, is China going to challenge the US and is a power rivalry inevitable?

What you hear from the Chinese leaders is that, China is part of the international order. One need to note that the term used here is "international order" and what it refers to is the UN and its institutions, including the principles of international law. This may overlap with the aforementioned "world order" but is not exactly the same. China has a strong sense of belonging to this UN led order system, as China is one of its founders and a beneficiary, a contributor, as well as part of its reform efforts. "There is no intention to unravel the system or start all over again." quoting from the Chinese President Xi.

Indeed, China is learning and offering its own ideas and initiatives to improve the international order system, for example, the initiation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which Britain has also signed up to, and the Silk Road economic belt initiative which would increase the connectivity between Asia and Europe. In the security field, the Chinese President also proposed to build common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.

Currently, an important security challenge is the dispute in the South China Sea on which China and the US have serious differences.

Apparently, I think the US is taking a geopolitical perspective and this probably comes from a long line of thinking.

Theories about geopolitics are not unfamiliar for you. It was the British scholar and MP Halford John Mackinder, at the beginning of the 20th century, advanced the 'Heartland Theory' and stated: "Who rules the Heartland commands the 'World-Island' and therefore commands the World". That, I understand, guided the European centred decades of geo-strategic rivalry.

When the US came to the top of the world, it switched geostrategic emphasis from land to the sea. According to Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory: Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia, and therefore controls the destiny of the world. So for the US, controlling strategic sea passages is vital for its world supremacy.

The reason I am recalling this is to try to understand, why China's maritime activities like the reconstruction on the Nansha land features would so much get on the nerves of the US.

To put things to perspective, the South China Sea covers 3.5 million square kilometres, but all the Islands and Shoals put together amount to less than 20 square kilometres. The US military and media magnified the issue and presented China's construction works as sign of geo-strategic ambition. During my visits to the States, I often hear the concern that a confrontation between China and the US is unavoidable if China continues to grow economically.

But for China, especially in the eyes of the general public, the focus of the concern is the sovereignty over Nansha islands and shoals and the surrounding water. Nansha is the most southern group of land features of the four archipelagos in the South China Sea. Chinese people firmly believe that we own those land features since the ancient times.

China's authority over Nansha was return to China from Japan after the World War II and was respected widely. For instance, countries including the US apply to the Chinese side when carrying out maritime research activities. It was during the deep cold war some neighbours started to occupy some land features, claiming discovering new territory. But really, who would discover new territories after the World War II?

China improved relations with neighbours during the 1990s and with years of patient negotiations arrived at consensus about allowing the disputes be resolved bilaterally through peacefully negotiation while the region moved on for cooperation. DOC culminated the efforts and provided rule based structure for managing the disputes.

But the recent years saw increasing provocations by some claimant countries in disregard of the DOC spirit and in an attempt to make their occupation of the Chinese territory permanent and legal. China, frustrated by futile persuasion, decided to reinforce its own presence including keeping better vigilance and making enlargement construction.

All this was happening against the back drop of the US Asian Pacific rebalancing which has growing military content and is giving greater emphasis on the interest of the alignment. This development added a new dimension. Tension started to heat up when the US sent navy ships and air-crafts to operate sometimes very close to China's land features, posing serious threat.

More and more in China, people believe that the US is behind those countries who are undermining China's interest.

Act invites reaction and mis-judgement lead to response. To overcome tension, China and the US need to have better understanding of each other's intentions and avoid mis-judgement.

So let me specify, what China wants first and foremost is to protect its sovereignty and right. To observe China, one should not lose sight of the historical perspective. This country stumbled into the 20th century with its capital under the occupation of the imperialists' armies, and for over a century before and after, China suffered the humiliation of foreign invasion and aggression. That is why the Chinese people and government are very sensitive about territorial integrity and would never allow such recurrence even if it's just an inch of land. We need sufficient defence to ensure that.

Second, China has high interest in maintaining freedom and safety of navigation of the international transportation route in the South China Sea and would make effort to ensure that.

Third, China believes that we share common interests with the neighbouring countries in maintaining peace and stability in the region. We do not have an agenda to gain supremacy. China is negotiating the Code of Conduct with the ASEAN countries to build effective rules.

Fourth, fundamentally China and the US have common interests in keeping peace and freedom of navigation. For the greater good, the two countries should be able to find way to cooperate.

I don't see why China and the US should enter into geo-strategic rivalry which will only lead to prolonged power fight. The world has seen so much of it and who knows at the turn of corner it's not the famous "Thucydides Trap".

Last July the 1st marked the 95 anniversary of the founding of Communist Party of China. President Xi Jinping who is also the General Secretary of the Party made an important speech to reminding the Party to keep to the original aspirations which would lead us to new success. In his speech, he also touched on world affairs and reiterated China's foreign policy objective as promoting world peace and prosperity as well as China's willingness to work with the world to promote the international order to be fairer to all countries.

So on that note, I want to conclude by saying that when we think about the future order, we may need to go beyond the constrains and hope for a more overarching concept, like "a global order" which should accommodate as much as possible and everything and anything that is needed in this new era can be included and every country and region's concerns and interest accommodated. In a sense, it should provide a common roof for all of us.

Thank you.