



China's 'New Tianxia' and the Indian Response

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(This is a modified version of a paper presented on 28 February 2015 at an international conference, *India's Foreign Policy Strategies through the 21st Century*, organized by the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.)

Following the ascension of a new leadership at the 18th CPC Congress in 2012, China has conducted a dynamic foreign policy – on the one hand asserting itself on territorial issues from the East and South China Seas to Line of Actual Control with India and on the other, coming up with new initiatives to draw the Asian continent first and then further afield into an ever closer economic and political relationship with China. It is this latter aspect of that is the subject of this paper. Two parts of this form of Chinese foreign policy are examined – one, China's frequent hosting of international conferences and seminars and two, its promotion of new ideas and new organizations as a way of shaping a common narrative for Asia with China in the lead. Alongside, this paper also highlights how India lags behind China in terms of organizing principles and institutional capabilities. By way of conclusion, I suggest that China is harking back to ancient principles and the worldviews of an imperial power as a framework for its foreign policy that continues to evolve in a world where its economic power is growing stronger, the influence of the West appears to be declining and calls for China to take greater international responsibility are also increasing.

China's Conference Diplomacy

In a roughly 30-day period beginning late October 2014, China hosted a major international military dialogue called the Xiangshan Forum designed as rival to the annual Shangri La Dialogue of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, London,¹ the World Internet Conference,² the Fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan,³ a UN meeting on the role of geospatial information in promoting sustainable development⁴ as well as an international conference each on humanitarian rules governing military operations,⁵ and anti-hijacking.⁶ In addition, the Chinese government offered to host an informal defence ministers' conference of all ASEAN countries in 2015,⁷ and was designated host of the G20 summit in 2016.⁸ Together these give us a sample of the literally hundreds of meetings of international organizations and associations that China hosts round the year in addition to the normal bilateral meetings involving heads of state and other government officials. Add to these, are the regular conferences

¹ *China Military Online*. 2014. 'Xiangshan Forum 2014'. 20-22 November, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/SpecialReports/node_46641.htm

² *Bloomberg Business*. 2014. 'China Hosts the World Internet Conference', 20 November, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2014-11-20/china-hosts-the-world-internet-conference>

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2014. 'The Fourth Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan Held in Beijing', 1 November, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1207147.shtml

⁴ *Xinhua*. 2014. 'High level geographical info forum held in Beijing', 22 November, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/22/c_133735273.htm

⁵ *China Military Online*. 2014. 'Foreign Officers study battlefield humanitarianism in China', 23 September, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-09/23/content_6150995.htm

⁶ *Xinhua*. 2014. 'China convenes int'l anti-hijack meeting', 24 October, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/24/c_133740517.htm

⁷ Minnie Chan. 2014. 'China offers to host Conference for Asean defence ministers', *South China Morning Post*. 29 April, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1639210/china-offers-host-conference-asean-defence-ministers>

⁸ *Xinhua*. 2014. 'China to host G20 summit in 2016', 16 November, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/16/c_133793116.htm

that China has begun organizing on its new Silk Road initiatives all across the country where dozens of participants from Asia and around the world participate.⁹

The point about this long list of conferences and events hosted by China is to underline the fact that there are several kinds of diplomatic outreach and China well understands the value of reaching out as often as possible through conferences and seminars to foreign intellectual and policy elites and of ensuring that these elites carry away positive impressions of China. This then feeds into larger policy and diplomatic successes for China at the regional and global levels. Beijing has even begun identifying and inviting those of younger generations who are potentially future thought and policy leaders in their countries.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has logged thousands of international miles since he assumed office six months ago. He has met all the major world leaders, addressed the UN General Assembly, even gone as far as tiny Fiji as well as completed a circuit of the strategically located Indian Ocean island states of Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. He has hosted all the SAARC leaders at home for his swearing-in as well as the Chinese, Russian and American presidents. Modi's schedule and indeed, that of his Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj, and her deputy, Gen. V. K. Singh (retd), might stand out in comparison with those of their counterparts in the previous UPA regime but what the NDA government is doing is merely bringing India up to speed.

India is a country with difficult neighbours and an economy that has not yet found a sustainable pattern of growth and development but it is also simultaneously one that needs to be an active regional and global player in order to defend its national interests. Modi and his ministers will thus have a lot more foreign trips to make and leaders and summits to host if they are to discharge their responsibilities fully.

However, since neither the Prime Minister, nor even the Foreign Minister, can travel everywhere and all the time, they will need greater support at home. There are several problems here, however – of limited intellectual resources, of poor infrastructure and of short-sighted bureaucracy and red-tape.

One, the Indian government needs an able and well-oiled establishment where diplomats, military officials and scholars work in tandem to both provide analyses and ideas as well as to implement national objectives but there is, at the moment, no such establishment or coordination. And worse, even the intellectual and human resources are lacking. India's area studies programmes are hopelessly underfunded and even experts can barely speak the language of the countries or regions they are studying. The tiny size of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is both a joke and source of frustration among embassies in New Delhi. The IFS is an island with the Indian civil services unwilling to take on lateral entry of specialists whether from other government services or from academia. It also tends to function largely under the illusion that diplomacy can be hived off from the wider strategic community, including academics, as and when they think fit. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has also hitherto been rather close-minded with respect to the role that the armed forces can play in achieving India's wider diplomatic goals, objecting to or plain preventing

⁹ For instance see, *Xinhua*. 2014. 'One belt one road initiatives key for building a safer Asia', 25 September, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-09/25/c_127030026.htm

the armed forces from their equally important attempts at military diplomacy. Given that the IFS lacks the numbers, the military with its pyramidal hierarchy could also provide a great number of perfectly qualified and experienced officers to take on diplomatic tasks across the globe with a little more training.

There is a still more serious issue, namely, India's lack of adequate numbers of qualified foreign language speakers. Most Indians have a preference still for European languages like French or Spanish but not many actually realize that the greatest numbers of French and Spanish speakers actually reside not in France or Spain but in Africa and Latin America respectively. These regions are where the very literatures of these languages are being reshaped and where economies are beginning to grow rapidly. And yet, very few Indian scholars and students or tourists and diplomats actually wish to study, travel or be posted in these regions.

The Chinese, on the other hand, understand that the centre of global growth and dynamism is shifting to these Third World continents and are sending their students, tourists, and diplomats out in large numbers to build a foundation for economic cooperation and political friendship and as a way of promoting Chinese models of political and economic development.

And what of India's near neighbourhood? Despite the threat of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism originating in Pakistan and in West Asia, despite several nuclear weapons programmes in the neighbourhood, very few Indians in responsible positions actually speak Arabic or Persian or Pashto. Even here China has made an entry with Chinese oil companies and weapons manufacturers becoming extremely active and the recent appointment of a Special Envoy for West Asia also indicating China's increasing political interest in the region.

While India has close historical ties with Central Asia, including political friendship in more recent times, there are very few Indians who actually speak Turkish or any of the Central Asian languages, surely both a security and political necessity?¹⁰ If Indian security forces – the three armed services and the intelligence establishments – do not have officers trained in these languages, and not just translators and a few diplomats, it is unlikely that New Delhi ever be able to take initiative in these regions that India is dependent on for its energy security and with their rapidly-evolving politics and security situations.

Prime Minister Modi's desire to convert 'Look East' to 'Act East'¹¹ will fail if India does not have adequate numbers of diplomats, military officers, and businessmen who speak the major languages of the region – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay or Thai. Despite the long and close ties with Vietnam, Indian government officials who can speak Vietnamese probably number in the single digits.¹² These facts speak for themselves as to the seriousness or lack thereof of India's engagement with these countries and regions.

¹⁰ For IFS, see p. 239, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2014. *Annual Report 2014-2015*. http://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/25009_External_Affairs_2014-2015_English_.pdf

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2014 'Prime Minister's remarks at the 9th East Asia Summit', 13 November 2014, http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24238/Prime_Ministers_remarks_at_the_9th_East_Asia_Summit_Nay_Pyi_Taw_Myanmar

¹² For IFS, see p. 239, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2014. *Annual Report 2014-2015*. http://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/25009_External_Affairs_2014-2015_English_.pdf

At major international forums, officials from many of the smaller countries – as well as China for that matter – all prefer to speak in their own languages. How then, for example, can India organize a major international military dialogue like the Xiangshan Forum in China, a G20 summit or any large-scale international conference for that matter with its requirements for simultaneous interpreters for officers and officials from various countries? Chinese capabilities in this regard are truly astounding as is evident at any major event they organize where there are both liaison officers speaking different foreign languages and simultaneous interpretation during conference sessions that range from competent to excellent.

Two, despite its image as a rising power and before that for several decades as a leader of the Third World, India simply lacks the physical infrastructure to host conferences and foreign delegations anywhere beyond the big cities. And sometimes even the major cities fall short in terms of proper transport infrastructure, and adequate numbers of good quality and affordable hotel rooms. The last factor is, in fact, a major hassle and expense for organizations wishing to host events in India with the result that non-governmental conferences often do not have too many participants in order to keep within budget. Hotel rooms in Chinese cities on the other hand are abundant, clean, well-maintained and relatively cheaper.

Whereas in India the 1951 and 1982 Asian Games and the 2010 Commonwealth Games were all hosted in New Delhi, over a two year period from 2008 to 2010, China hosted the Olympics in Beijing, the World Expo in Shanghai and the Asian Games in Guangzhou. China has used major international events to build up infrastructure not just in its capital but in other major cities as well. Even tiny South Korea has hosted the Asian Games in three different locations.¹³

Three, India's default policy of making visas for conference participation or research purposes extremely difficult to get is actually illogical and short-sighted. The Chinese, by contrast, realize the value of interacting with international intellectual and policy elites as often as possible in order to learn what is going on in the world around them, what views of China they hold and to create opportunities to counter or disprove negative views, if any.

By keeping out scholars trying to learn more about India, New Delhi also loses a chance of influencing them and if anything, solidifies negative opinions or misperceptions about India. Of course, China keeps out those scholars who are openly sympathetic to or supportive of say Tibetan independence or Ugyhur separatism but these are the exceptions that prove the rule – the vast majority of scholars and researchers are welcome in China and free to travel and speak at academic and research and government institutions in China.

Confidence, organization and a practically permanent cadre of educated young Chinese to act as liaison officers round the clock for international conference participants arriving in the country – all of these add to considerable propaganda value and goodwill for China. India's poor record of safety for international tourists, of organization of major events – the organization of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, for instance was marred by poor planning and corruption scandals – and poorly-trained human resources, on the other hand, offer a stark contrast. For India to catch up with China will take time but to begin the process, mindsets need to change

¹³ The cities were Seoul (1986), Busan (2002) and Incheon (2014).

immediately and the investments in area studies and foreign languages in the universities, in think-tanks and research institutions and in the expansion of the foreign service need to start today.

China's New Initiatives

Since coming to power, Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, has not only converted himself into a strongman at home by his tough anti-corruption crackdown, he has also encouraged and promoted innovation in China's foreign policy outreach. One such is 'one belt, one road' (OBOR) initiative launched in 2013. The 'one belt' refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt (sichouzhilu jingjidai) connecting China with Central Asia and onwards to Europe while the 'one road' is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (ershiyi shiji haishang sichouzhilu) connecting China via the seas to Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. These 'new Silk Roads' recall a history when China was an important player in the politics and commerce of the Asian region and to reinterpret this for contemporary times in such a way that both American dominance is countered and other countries accept the centrality and importance of China regionally and globally.

All along these new Silk Roads, China is pushing a mantra it has long believed in, that economic development is a panacea for political instability and disaffection. This involves in the main investment in physical infrastructure development – involving roads, railways, telecom, electricity and energy – alongside encouraging people-to-people contacts in the form of educational exchanges and sister-city agreements.¹⁴ The latter might, in fact, largely be about lubricating big-ticket deals in the countries that lie along the Silk Roads. Whatever, the kind of monies and the diplomatic attention that Beijing is lavishing on its immediate neighbourhood and the countries along the OBOR – many of them small countries, often weak and underdeveloped and which do not receive much attention from the West or its economic and financial institutions – has truly won Beijing a great deal of attention and goodwill, at least among political elites in these countries.

There might be a shadow of sorts hanging over Chinese largesse given the way these are disbursed sometimes with political elites or certain sections among them cornering them or profiting from them in many instances and thus, creating resentment among ordinary people in these countries against China. But the Chinese have some experience of such blowback in many countries including, in Africa, and perhaps that is also why they also lay great stress on people-to-people contacts, the offering of scholarships and why Chinese media is actively involved in literally creating positive stories about China's relations with the country in question as well as of the OBOR.¹⁵ This then contributes to creating a narrative about China that it both directs and benefits from. Essentially, China claims that policies such as the OBOR seek to spread the bounties of Chinese economic growth and prosperity to its neighbours and that this is proof of its intention of peaceful development in the international system.

¹⁴ To take one example, namely Pakistan, see Irfan Haider. 2015. 'Details of agreements signed during Xi's visit to Pakistan', *Dawn*. 20 April, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1177129/details-of-agreements-signed-during-xis-visit-to-pakistan> and Mateen Haider and Irfan Haider. 2015. 'Economic corridor in focus as Pakistan, China sign 51 MOU's', *Dawn*. 20 April, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1177109/economic-corridor-in-focus-as-pakistan-china-sign-51-mous>

¹⁵ Author's observations from conferences attended in Urumqi, Xinjiang on the Silk Road Economic Belt, 26-27 June 2014 and Quanzhou, Fujian on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, 11-12 February 2015.

Another example of the nimbleness and innovation of Chinese foreign policy is its push to create new institutions as rivals to existing institutions or to fill gaps that have been left unfilled by the dominant Western powers and regimes. Alongside the unveiling of the OBOR, China also created a US\$40 billion Silk Road Fund (SRF) targeted at specifically the countries that lie along the proposed new Silk Roads.¹⁶ Another initiative was the larger, more inclusive Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This initiative also supports the Silk Roads policy of course, and along with the SRF stresses strong internal drivers of China's external policy. In essence, the OBOR and its spin-offs the SRF and to an extent the AIIB are about exporting the huge overcapacity of Chinese infrastructure companies abroad where many countries actually need this capacity. In the process, China also hopefully avoids further addition to the property bubble and bad debt problems at home, among other things. Of course, even if China has declared the SRF and AIIB as open to capitalization from other countries, it appears obvious for the moment that China will supply the bulk of the capital – it has promised to fund half of the US\$50 billion startup capital for the AIIB¹⁷ – and therefore, also provide the leadership. Unlike the BRICS New Development Bank, where the first presidency has been allotted to India, but where China insisted on hosting the Bank,¹⁸ in the case of the AIIB, both the secretary-general and the headquarters are Chinese.¹⁹

While not openly linked to the OBOR, the AIIB also creates foreign policy opportunities for China. It has the opportunity to be seen as both a responsible international stakeholder and a generous partner for countries in the region. Beijing has simultaneously tried to show that its initiatives are not threatening to the existing international order.²⁰ Besides promoting regional connectivity and self-reliance for Asian countries, the OBOR and AIIB also create opportunities for developed countries in the form of greater investment opportunities as well as for promoting their own economic recovery.²¹ As the Chinese Finance Minister Lou Jiwei has pointed out, historically, the establishment of regional multilateral development banks such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development did not weaken the influence of existing development banks such as the World Bank. Rather, it was the total capacity of development financing that increased promoting still further development of the global economy. Thus, the AIIB, for instance, will be an additional source for development financing in the Asian region with a specific focus on infrastructure and in contrast to the ADB whose focus is on poverty alleviation.²² Lou also stated that the AIIB would learn from the good experiences and practices of other multilateral development banks accumulated over several decades.²³ This is especially important as Asian nations today, do not have the luxury of repeating the mistakes of the past and

¹⁶ Zhang Yuzhe. 2014. 'With New Funds, China Hits a Silk Road Stride', *Caixin Online*. 3 December, <http://english.caixin.com/2014-12-03/100758419.html>

¹⁷ John Kemp. 2014. 'China takes Silk Road to Challenge US role in Asia', *South China Morning Post*. 12 November, <http://www.scmp.com/business/economy/article/1637664/china-takes-silk-road-challenge-us-role-asia>

¹⁸ *Bloomberg TV*. 2014. 'India gets first presidency of the BRICS Bk', 16 July, <http://www.btv.in.com/videos/watch/8003/india-gets-first-presidency-of-the-brics-bk>

¹⁹ *The Indian Express*. 2014. 'India, 20 others set up Asian infrastructure investment bank', 24 October, <http://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/india-20-others-set-up-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank/>

²⁰ For instance, China reportedly offered the vice-presidency of the Bank to Japan. See *Nikkei Asian Review*. 2015. 'China offered Japan No.2 post at new bank', 15 April, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Japan-Update/China-offered-Japan-No.-2-post-at-new-bank>

²¹ *China Daily USA*. 2014. 'Chinese Finance Minister says AIIB a win-win for each member', 24 October, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2014-10/24/content_18799109.htm

²² *Xinhua*. 2014. 'AIIB complementary to existing MDDBS, says Chinese Finance Minister', 24 October, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/24/c_133740270.htm

²³ *Xinhua*. 2014. 'AIIB to set up high-standard, feasible safeguard policies, says Chinese Finance Minister', 24 October, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/24/c_133740339.htm

must, in fact, enforce even higher standards, in ensuring labour rights and environmental protection, for example. That said, the record of Chinese companies in this respect is not very encouraging whether at home or abroad.

All of these apart, the AIIB has already been the source of great propaganda successes for Beijing given that many nations including India, and in a shock to the United States, even the United Kingdom, signed on as founding members of the AIIB.²⁴ Even if not always overtly so, these Chinese initiatives are clearly targeted against American hegemony in the world. And China has managed to push and promote them in a manner that even the existence of territorial disputes has not prevented all of the ASEAN members from being a part of the AIIB.²⁵

One might ask where is India in all this? India, with its excellent tradition of banking and financial sector regulatory frameworks,²⁶ is a natural participant and leader in Asia's multilateral initiatives as well as a partner for China in establishing and strengthening new initiatives. But it is far from certain that India thinks of itself in this manner, as having legitimate cause for striving with China, even when the initiative is largely Chinese in nature – one only has to recall the somewhat reluctant acquiescence India gave to becoming a member of the AIIB and the fact that it sent only a bureaucrat and not a minister to the signing ceremony in Beijing.²⁷ This is a problem that has afflicted India for several decades with reluctance to give whole-hearted cooperation to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) regional cooperation forum, even though India is a member and the persistent attempts to deny China full membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

India has shown some signals of greater receptivity to the BCIM in the form of an acceptance of a Chinese proposal for a BCIM Economic Corridor,²⁸ for example, but this is not proof enough yet that New Delhi has come to the realization that resentment over China's role and abilities to drive regional organization or attempts to keep China out of South Asia are both fruitless exercises in the long run. While India was part of the first batch of 21 founding members of the AIIB, unlike in the case of the BRICS New Development Bank, where an Indian official is slated to be the first head,²⁹ Beijing has not been so easily amenable to sharing AIIB's leadership or as of now, giving India much of a say in the organization. What is more, if the AIIB really takes off – and its members include Brazil, Russia and South Africa – it is unclear what role the BRICS New Development

²⁴ Sabrina Snell. 2015. 'U.S. Allies Split with Washington, Bank with China', *Financial Times*. 31 March, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/cd466ddc-cbc7-11e4-aeb5-00144feab7de.html>

²⁵ See full list of AIIB members at Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. 2015. 'Prospective Founding Members', <http://aiibank.org/members.html>

²⁶ For instance, the Securities and Exchange Board of India that regulates the Indian stock market was recently ranked 7th worldwide for investor protection, the highest among the BRICS nations and higher even than many advanced economies such as the US, Japan, France and Germany. Significantly, this was a huge jump from its 21st rank in 2013. *Zee News*. 2014. 'India ranks 7th on investor protection; ahead of US, Japan', 29 October, <http://zeenews.india.com/business/news/finance/india-ranks-7th-on-investor-protection-ahead-of-us-japan-110867.html>

²⁷ *The Indian Express*. 2014. 'India, 20 others set up Asian infrastructure investment bank', 24 October, <http://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/india-20-others-set-up-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank/>

²⁸ For instance, see Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2012. 'India's Look East Policy at the 10th Meeting of the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Cooperation Forum', *Speeches and Statements*, 18 February, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/18855/Speech+by+Foreign+secretary+on+Indias+Look+East+Policy+at+the+10th+Meeting+of+the+BCIM+Bangladesh+China+India+Myanmar+Cooperation+Forum>

²⁹ *NDTV*. 2014. 'India to Head BRICS' \$100 Billion New Development Bank', 16 July, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/india-to-head-brics-100-billion-new-development-bank-559330>

Bank will actually play. It could well be that the BRICS New Development Bank with its equal contributions from the five members but its unwieldy power balance is simply the cover for Beijing to achieve more substantial outcomes through the AIIB which it might more or less control both in terms of capital investment as well as through developing country allies.

Naturally, India's present capabilities and resources do not allow the expression of any great ambition in these matters but the question is whether New Delhi realizes the consequences of the Chinese new initiatives and their drive to create institutions also helps shape the political and economic narrative of Asia in ways that might sideline India as just one among many countries in an Asia led by China.

China has spotted and taken advantage of a crying need for infrastructure development and financing and at the same time managed to sell itself as a benevolent power in the region looking out for common interest and 'win-win'. This despite the fact that China has not relented in its assertiveness on the East China Sea and South China Sea disputes and in its challenges to Western interpretations and foundations of international law. Can India stand by and only challenge China from a distance by simply reiterating the need for respecting international law without also say, supporting smaller disputants with its own capacity in international law? Why for instance, when the Chinese have refused to accept international arbitration on their maritime disputes does India not actively advertise, as a sign of how great powers behave, its acceptance of an international tribunal's verdict on a maritime dispute with Bangladesh?³⁰

New Tianxia and the Challenge for India

Taken together, China's specific foreign policy initiatives – both the nuts-and-bolts version that is the organization and hosting of conferences as well as the grand ideas version of creating new narratives and new organizations as justifications or platforms for Chinese foreign policy activism alongside its assertiveness in territorial disputes constitute a framework of Chinese foreign policy that might be best described as a new form of tianxia – or 'all under heaven' – an ancient term that in material, non-metaphysical context, was a framework used by successive Chinese imperial rulers to refer to China's overlordship, including cultural and economic superiority, over neighbouring kingdoms and its prominent role in arbitrating disputes and conflicts between them.³¹

China's organization of conferences at home involving many foreign participants and its drive to create new multilateral institutions are exercises in power – soft and hard. Beijing is attempting to not just increase China's influence but also to put forward a new way of doing business different from the Western/American approaches and trying constantly to assuage fears of Chinese

³⁰ This has already been suggested in an influential Singaporean policy publication. Sam Bateman. 2014. 'Resolution of Bangladesh- India Maritime Boundary: Model for South China sea Disputes', *RSIS Commentary*, No. 158, 7 August, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/CO14158.pdf>

³¹ The term has been interpreted in multiple ways by Chinese philosophers and intellectuals as well as statesmen. In the modern era, a *T'ien Hsia Monthly* was published in Republican China but the most prominent of recent interpretations is by Zhao Tingyang. Both the monthly and Zhao's work took broader, cosmopolitan, and therefore, somewhat utopian approaches towards the interpretation of *tianxia*. For more, see *China Heritage Quarterly*. 2009. 'The Heritage of T'ien Hsia, All-Under-Heaven', No. 19, September, <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/editorial.php?issue=019> and Zhang Feng. 2010. 'The Tianxia System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia', *China Heritage Quarterly*. No. 21, March 2010, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=026_tianxia.inc&issue=026

hegemony. To this end, China is beginning to ramp up its engagement of its neighbours in the form of summits, conferences, military diplomacy, infrastructure development and other kinds of investments, media outreach and larger embassies. China's massive financial resources and the attraction of its model of development are on full display through its conferences. To call Iranians and Saudis together or Indians and Pakistanis, to let them have a go at each other at these conferences or to call Central Asians and Russians under one roof knowing that they might gang up on China and ready to take it on, to call a few skeptical Europeans and Americans but also just as many who are willing to bat for China³² – these are signs of a confident power. It reflects a belief that China has the ideas and the financial resources - to influence and change mindsets, to fundamentally alter and shape regional and global geopolitics. And what is more they are willing and ready to do it using multiple methods – the steady undermining of status quo in the east and the soft, non-confrontational conferences/summitry/wining-and-dining system in areas where attitudes towards China are not so (or not yet) sharply antagonistic or suspicious. This constitutes a new form of Chinese dominance of the world akin to tianxia.

India needs to keep reminding the Chinese and other participants – whether in conferences or in multilateral organizations – that India too, was a presence on the ancient Silk Routes and continues to be one along the new Silk Roads. The Silk Route is just a name – coined by a German at that³³ - and should not carry the mistaken impression that it was either Chinese in origin or controlled by the Chinese. In other words, it was also Indian products and ideas that travelled through the Silk Route and Indian influence on the Silk Route through the presence of traders and the spread of Buddhism was not inconsiderable. India ought to take seriously participation in many of these Chinese initiatives in the form of market expos, inter-university cooperation, joint research projects, scholarship exchanges rather than keeping away out of pique or confusion.

Overall, there is a great deal of goodwill for India among the non-Chinese at both these conferences and in China's wider neighbourhood but if China offers such substantial benefits, it is very hard for anyone to resist and it is even worse when India fails to meet even those obligations it has committed to. The hands-off approach Indian officialdom adopts to promoting Indian soft power, is at best trying to make a virtue out of necessity – India simply does not have enough hands in the MEA and in the missions – and at worst, it is a sign of laziness and/or lack of strategic vision.

The new government in New Delhi has declared an 'Act East' policy to replace the older 'Look East' policy but this appears focused on the economic dimension. It must consider however, whether it should not play a more robust role in the political and security domains and in a visible, active manner. This also involves an ideational element – along the lines of what the Chinese have attempted in creating a concept of 'new Silk Roads' and in the process engendering a reinterpretation of history. India, however, cannot rely on creating a 'new history' like the Chinese are doing papering over the uncomfortable facts or, resort to a parochial, nativist view of history as its right-wing is wont to do. Rather, an Indian idea must both be universally acceptable and stand

³² Author's observations from conferences attended in Urumqi, Xinjiang on the Silk Road Economic Belt, 26-27 June 2014 and Quanzhou, Fujian on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, 11-12 February 2015.

³³ The term 'Silk Road' was originally coined by the German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late 19th century; less well-known is the fact that his explorations and studies also covered the spread of Buddhism from India into China along these Silk Roads. *The Silk Road*. 2007. 'Richthofen's Silk Roads: Toward the Archaeology of a Concept', Vol. 5, No. 1, Summer, http://silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol5num1/srjournal_v5n1.pdf

out as a moral and ideological improvement on other ideas that have come before – whether Chinese or American – as well as be backed by solid capabilities based on political stability and economic development at home that are respectful of the Constitution.

At the base of all this that India must do, however, lies the fundamental problem of a lack of human resources capacity within and outside the Indian government. An expansion in the numbers of India's diplomats accompanied simultaneously by an improvement in their quality as well as in the quality of support that they receive from universities, research institutions and think-tanks is the sine qua non for India being able to meet the Chinese challenge.

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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution which has a leadership role in promoting Chinese and East Asian Studies in India.

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