

Chinese Expansionist Philosophy's Historical Background

Kamran Shirinzade 

Abstract. *This article examines the historical foundations and contemporary manifestations of ideas commonly associated with Chinese expansionism. It asks how classical concepts such as Tianxia, Confucian moral authority, Legalist state capacity, and tributary relations are reinterpreted in present-day foreign policy. The study applies qualitative historical analysis, comparative political thought, discourse analysis, and a focused case study of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The findings show that classical philosophy does not mechanically determine current policy; rather, selected historical concepts provide a vocabulary through which national rejuvenation, connectivity, hierarchy, sovereignty, and international leadership are framed. Contemporary Chinese influence is multidimensional and operates through infrastructure finance, trade, institutions, technology, diplomacy, and military modernization. The BRI illustrates both the developmental potential and the strategic ambiguity of this approach, particularly in Eurasia and the South Caucasus. Realist, liberal, and constructivist interpretations each explain part of the phenomenon but none is sufficient alone. The article concludes that China's expanding global role is best understood as an adaptive synthesis of historical narratives and modern state interests, not simply as territorial conquest or entirely benign cooperation.*

Keywords: *China, expansionist thought, Tianxia, Belt and Road Initiative, geoeconomics, South Caucasus*

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Çin ekspansionist düşüncəsinin tarixi əsasları və müasir ölçüləri

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Xülasə. *Məqalədə Çin ekspansionizmi ilə əlaqələndirilən ideyaların tarixi əsasları və müasir təzahürləri araşdırılır. Tədqiqat Tianxia, konfutsiçi mənəvi hakimiyyət, legalist dövlət gücü və tribut münasibətləri kimi klassik anlayışların müasir xarici siyasətdə necə yenidən şərh edildiyini müəyyənləşdirməyə çalışır. Araşdırmada keyfiyyət yönümlü tarixi təhlil, müqayisəli siyasi fikir, diskurs təhlili və “Bir kəmə, bir yol” təşəbbüsünün nümunəvi hadisə kimi öyrənilməsi tətbiq olunur. Nəticələr göstərir ki, klassik fəlsəfə müasir siyasəti birbaşa müəyyən etmir; seçilmiş tarixi anlayışlar milli dirçəliş, qarşılıqlı bağlılıq, iyerarxiya, suverenlik və beynəlxalq liderliyin əsaslandırıldığı siyasi dil yaradır. Çinin müasir təsiri infrastruktur maliyyəsi, ticarət, beynəlxalq institutlar, texnologiya, diplomatiya və hərbi modernləşmə vasitəsilə çoxölçülü şəkildə həyata keçirilir.*

“Bir kəmə, bir yol” təşəbbüsü bu yanaşmanın həm inkişaf imkanlarını, həm də strateji qeyri-müəyyənliyini, xüsusilə Avrasiya və Cənubi Qafqazda aydın göstərir. Məqalə Çinin genişlənən global rolunu ərazi işğalından daha geniş, tarixi narrativlərlə müasir dövlət maraqlarının adaptiv sintezi kimi qiymətləndirir.

Açar sözlər: Çin, ekspansionist düşüncə, Tianxia, Bir kəmə bir yol təşəbbüsü, geoiqtisadiyyat, Cənubi Qafqaz

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Introduction

China’s approach to international relations draws on an extensive intellectual and political history. Whereas mainstream Western theories often emphasize sovereign equality, competition, and balances of power, classical Chinese traditions also foreground relational order, moral leadership, hierarchy, and social harmony. Daoist, Confucian, and Legalist ideas emerged in distinct historical settings and should not be treated as a unified doctrine, yet their concepts continue to appear in contemporary debates about China’s place in the world. As China’s material capabilities have expanded, political leaders and scholars have increasingly invoked traditional language to explain national rejuvenation, international cooperation, and global governance (Callahan, 2016; Qin, 2018).

The nature of Chinese expansionism is contested. Conventional territorial expansion is only one possible meaning of the term. Contemporary Chinese statecraft relies heavily on economic integration, infrastructure finance, technological networks, institutional participation, strategic diplomacy, and military modernization. These instruments have led analysts to describe China’s approach as geoeconomic or institutional expansion rather than classical colonial conquest (Doshi, 2021; Economy, 2018). The debate has intensified under Xi Jinping because of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Made in China 2025, the modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Digital Silk Road, and more assertive activity in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

This article asks two questions: To what extent do traditional Chinese political concepts illuminate contemporary foreign policy, and through which instruments does China expand its influence today? Its purpose is not to label all Chinese engagement as domination, but to distinguish historical narratives, material interests, developmental cooperation, and strategic power projection. The BRI and its Eurasian dimension, including the South Caucasus, provide a focused context for this assessment.

Materials and Methods

The research uses a qualitative design combining historical analysis, comparative political thought, discourse analysis, and case-study reasoning. Historical analysis traces changes in ideas of political order, frontier security, tributary relations, and imperial legitimacy across major dynastic and modern periods. Comparative analysis distinguishes classical concepts from their contemporary reinterpretation, avoiding the assumption that present policy is a direct continuation of ancient philosophy.

The source base consists of classical concepts discussed in the scholarly literature, official policy language, books and journal articles on Chinese grand strategy, and studies of the BRI. The analysis is organized through three international-relations perspectives. Neorealism is used to examine material power and security competition; liberal approaches clarify the role of trade, institutions, and interdependence; and constructivism explains the political use of identity, historical memory, and civilizational narratives (Foot & Walter, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2014). The BRI serves as the primary case through which economic, diplomatic, institutional, and regional implications are compared.

The study does not use surveys, interviews, or original statistical data. Its conclusions are therefore interpretive and concern the logic found in texts, policies, and documented cases rather than measured public opinion. Triangulation across historical, theoretical, and policy sources is used to reduce one-sided interpretation.

Results

Historical Foundations of Chinese Political Expansion

The territorial and political reach of successive Chinese dynasties developed over centuries through a combination of military campaigns, diplomacy, migration, administration, trade, and tributary relationships. The Han and Tang dynasties expanded influence into Central Asia, Korea, and Vietnam while seeking to protect trade routes, manage frontier threats, and consolidate imperial authority. These processes varied greatly by period and region; they cannot be reduced to either peaceful exchange or continuous conquest (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006).

During the Ming period, the maritime expeditions led by Zheng He connected China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. The expeditions projected prestige, facilitated trade, and reinforced diplomatic and tributary ties, but did not create a European-style system of permanent overseas colonies. The Qing dynasty achieved the largest territorial extent of the imperial state, incorporating or consolidating rule over Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia, and Taiwan. The borders and administrative arrangements produced during this period continue to influence modern ideas of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The ‘Century of Humiliation,’ conventionally dated from the First Opium War to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, transformed the political meaning of territory and foreign influence. Unequal treaties, foreign concessions, invasion, and internal fragmentation became central to modern national memory. Consequently, the protection of sovereignty and the goal of national rejuvenation occupy a particularly important place in the Chinese Communist Party’s political narrative (Economy, 2018).

Tianxia, Confucianism, and Legalist State Capacity

The concept of Tianxia—often translated as ‘All Under Heaven’—imagined political order as a morally and culturally structured world rather than a system of formally equal sovereign states. Contemporary scholars disagree about whether Tianxia offers a usable model of global governance or functions primarily as a historical metaphor. Its relevance today lies less in institutional continuity than in the language it offers for discussing harmony, hierarchy, responsibility, and leadership (Callahan, 2016; Qin, 2018).

Confucian thought emphasizes moral authority, proper conduct, and rule through virtue. In contemporary political discourse, such themes support claims that legitimate leadership can attract cooperation without coercion. Legalist traditions, by contrast, stress administrative capacity,

discipline, law, and centralized state power. Modern Chinese governance combines rhetorical appeals to harmony with strong institutions of party-state control. Traditional concepts thus operate as selective resources: they legitimize different aspects of policy but do not replace calculations of power, security, and economic interest (Yan, 2019).

The Belt and Road Initiative as Geoeconomic Statecraft

Since its announcement in 2013, the BRI has become the most visible instrument of China's international economic strategy. Through transport corridors, ports, energy projects, industrial zones, financial cooperation, and digital infrastructure, the initiative seeks to improve connectivity across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. Supporters emphasize infrastructure gaps, trade facilitation, investment, and development. Critics focus on debt sustainability, opaque procurement, political dependency, environmental risk, and the strategic use of dual-purpose infrastructure (Callahan, 2016; Doshi, 2021).

The BRI also demonstrates that China's influence is negotiated rather than imposed uniformly. Outcomes depend on host-state institutions, local political coalitions, financing terms, project selection, and regional competition. The Hambantota Port debate and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor illustrate why the same project may be interpreted as development cooperation, commercial risk, or strategic leverage. A careful assessment must therefore distinguish evidence of unsustainable debt, domestic policy failure, renegotiation, and deliberate coercion rather than assuming a single model of 'debt-trap diplomacy.'

In the South Caucasus, transport geography connects the BRI to the Trans-Caspian and Middle Corridor routes. Azerbaijan and Georgia occupy key positions between Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, Türkiye, and European markets. Research published in *Scientific Work* identifies Azerbaijan's infrastructure and transit role as an important component of BRI connectivity in the region (Khanbabazade, 2023). More recent analysis in *Scientific Research* likewise emphasizes the growing commercial and geopolitical relevance of the Middle Corridor and Azerbaijan's role in multimodal transport (Mammadov, 2025). These studies support the view that the BRI's regional impact depends on the interaction between Chinese objectives and the independent interests of transit states.

Military, Technological, and Diplomatic Dimensions

Economic statecraft is accompanied by rapid military modernization. The PLA has invested in naval capabilities, missile forces, cyber operations, space systems, and artificial intelligence. China's island-building and militarization in the South China Sea, its extensive maritime claims, and increased military activity around Taiwan are widely interpreted as efforts to alter the regional balance of power. The establishment of a support base in Djibouti in 2017 further demonstrated the growing global reach of Chinese security interests (Friedberg, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2021).

Technological expansion is another central dimension. Huawei, Alibaba, Tencent, and other Chinese companies participate in telecommunications, cloud services, e-commerce, financial technology, and smart-city systems across many countries. The Digital Silk Road can reduce infrastructure gaps and improve connectivity, but it also raises concerns about cybersecurity, standards, data governance, surveillance, and technological dependency. The strategic value of technical standards means that competition now extends beyond territory and trade into digital ecosystems.

Diplomatically, China presents itself as a supporter of South–South cooperation, development, sovereignty, and non-interference. It has expanded its role in the United Nations, established or strengthened institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and promoted the idea of

a ‘community with a shared future for mankind.’ At the same time, more confrontational ‘Wolf Warrior’ rhetoric has sometimes conflicted with the image of restrained and harmonious leadership. The coexistence of partnership language and assertive defense of national interests illustrates the hybrid character of contemporary Chinese diplomacy (Economy, 2024).

Contemporary Chinese International-Relations Thought

Chinese international-relations scholarship is diverse and cannot be reduced to a single expansionist school. Yan Xuetong’s moral realism combines realist competition with insights drawn from classical Chinese political thought. It argues that international leadership depends on both strategic capability and political authority, thereby linking material power to legitimacy (Yan, 2019). Qin Yaqing’s relational theory shifts attention from isolated actors to relationships and social processes. From this perspective, influence can grow through partnerships, infrastructure cooperation, institutions, and dense interdependence rather than through territorial annexation (Qin, 2018).

These approaches show how Chinese scholars seek to contribute concepts that are not derived exclusively from Western theoretical traditions. Nevertheless, their ideas should not be treated as official policy blueprints. They are best understood as part of a broader intellectual environment in which China’s rise, identity, and preferred international order are debated.

Discussion

The results indicate that traditional philosophy supplies a framework of legitimation and interpretation rather than a direct causal explanation of contemporary foreign policy. Modern Chinese policymakers act within a system of sovereign states, nuclear deterrence, global markets, and international law. Classical concepts such as harmony, Tianxia, moral rule, and state capacity are selectively combined with modern objectives of economic development, regime security, technological advancement, territorial integrity, and national rejuvenation.

Realism explains the importance of military modernization, regional balancing, and strategic competition with the United States. Liberal approaches clarify why trade, investment, infrastructure, and institutions can create mutual benefits and constrain conflict. Constructivism reveals how historical memory and civilizational identity shape policy narratives. The evidence supports a combined framework: China seeks greater capability and influence, but it often pursues these aims through economic and institutional mechanisms embedded in cooperation (Allison, 2017; Ikenberry, 2008).

Counterarguments remain important. Chinese officials stress peaceful development, non-interference, mutual benefit, and the absence of a colonial tradition comparable to European overseas empires. Many BRI projects respond to genuine infrastructure needs and are actively requested by partner governments. Confucian ideals of moral authority and collective welfare also provide a normative explanation for cooperation. Yet official rhetoric does not by itself resolve concerns about asymmetric dependence, strategic infrastructure, maritime coercion, or political leverage. Evaluation must therefore remain case-specific and evidence-based.

Cultural preservation and self-reliance add another layer. Historical concern with language, ritual, education, and political cohesion has modern parallels in policies concerning technological autonomy, food and energy security, border control, and cultural confidence. Confucius Institutes and international media expand soft power, while the discourse of a shared future presents Chinese leadership as oriented toward collective well-being. These activities may create genuine exchange

and attraction, but they can also serve strategic communication. The distinction depends on transparency, reciprocity, and the degree of political control involved.

Conclusion

Chinese expansionist thought is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be defined exclusively through territorial conquest. Historically, Chinese states combined political hierarchy, frontier security, cultural influence, trade, diplomacy, and military force. In the contemporary period, China's global reach is expressed through infrastructure finance, technological systems, international institutions, diplomatic partnerships, and military modernization.

The BRI demonstrates both the developmental opportunities and the strategic ambiguity of this approach. In Eurasia and the South Caucasus, China's objectives intersect with the interests of transit states such as Azerbaijan, which seek investment, connectivity, and diversified trade routes. Regional outcomes are therefore co-produced by China and partner countries rather than dictated by Beijing alone.

Overall, contemporary Chinese expansion is best understood as an adaptive synthesis of historical narratives and modern state interests. If expansionism is defined only as territorial acquisition, present-day China differs significantly from earlier empires. If it includes geoeconomic influence, technological leadership, institutional agenda-setting, and strategic power projection, China's international footprint is clearly expanding. Future research should compare individual BRI projects, financing arrangements, public responses, and long-term institutional effects to distinguish mutually beneficial cooperation from dependency or coercion.

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