

## *Building a More “Democratic” and “Multipolar” World: China’s Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries\**

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### *Abstract*

This article contextualizes and clarifies the political and security components of China’s contemporary strategic engagement with developing countries. Over the last decade, China has adopted a more self-confident and assertive foreign policy, under which political and military elements have become more prominent. This approach places renewed emphasis on China’s position in and leadership of the developing world. China’s leaders look to coordinate policy with “newly emerging powers” to support and foster what they identify as the trend towards a more “multipolar” world order, that is, soft balancing against American “hegemonism.” Moreover, Beijing seeks to curry favor with and raise the voices of developing countries in international institutions to build a normative constituency against American unilateralism. As part of this effort to “democratize” international relations, Beijing has also

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underwritten a constellation of China-dominated regional institutions that harmonize its policies and provide venues to build strategic relationships with developing countries.

“As the realignment of international powers accelerates and the strength of emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing, the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced,” begins China’s 2019 Defense White Paper.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, not since the Mao era have developing countries played a larger role in China’s geostrategy. In an effort to constrain the United States’ unilateral use of force, China’s leaders have adopted policies that catalyze what they see as an historic trend towards “multipolarity” and the “democratization” of international relations. Developing states, in turn, are becoming ever more important strategic partners for China, which despite its rapid rise continues to portray itself as their leader.

Over the last two decades, China’s leaders have come to believe they can reshape the world in ways more befitting their interests. In 2007, President Hu Jintao said that China would seek to create a “harmonious world” and asserted that the world cannot “enjoy prosperity and stability without China.”<sup>2</sup> Since the 2009 global financial crisis, Beijing has adopted a more self-confident and proactive foreign policy, with political and military elements gaining prominence. Around the same time, Beijing also initiated a more assertive approach to maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, President Xi Jinping proposed a “new type of great major power relations” with the United States, and other leaders expanded on China’s global “major power diplomacy.”<sup>4</sup>

The following year, Xi launched his signature policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious strategy to reshape the world by loaning a trillion or more dollars to developing states for infrastructure development. BRI has now expanded to include nearly every aspect of China’s foreign policy toward the developing world and is reshaping the global lending landscape. The second BRI Forum, held in April 2019, was less triumphalist than the first in 2017, and included commitments to increase the quality of projects.<sup>5</sup> This assertiveness marks a rapid and dramatic departure from more than two decades of adherence to Deng Xiaoping’s admonition that China should “keep a low profile” (韬光養晦 *taoguang yanghui*).