Chinese Global Orders:
Socialism, Tradition, and Nation in China-Russia Relations

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While many use rational IR theory to explain Chinese foreign policy behavior, this article follows global IR to employ interpretivist theory to examine how Chinese elites understand their country's role in the world. In particular, it explores the Chinese global order ideas of socialism, tradition, and nation through a comparative analysis of how they work in China-Russia relations, especially after China's 20th Communist Party Congress in 2022. The first section presents a critical analysis of the realist understanding of the China-Russia-U.S. strategic triangle. It argues that the socialist concept of "united front work" better explains Chinese (and Russian) policy in terms of short-term "tactical triangles." To probe China's long-term global order ideas, the second section explores narratives of tradition to examine the concentric circles model of global order seen in Chinese tianxia and Russian Eurasianism. To understand these competing Russocentric and Sinocentric global orders, the third section explores how each country's official historiography highlights narratives of the nation and especially how national rejuvenation requires correcting the "national humiliation" of lost territories. Rather than see these narratives in a linear chronological history—i.e., from tradition to socialism to nationalism—this article considers how they overlap in socialism, tradition, and nation, a non-linear dynamic triad of global order ideas. It concludes first that further research is necessary to examine the interrelation of these three narratives: while nation and tradition are often employed to support the overarching narrative of socialism in recent years, this could certainly change. The conclusion then argues that while these narratives may be coherent theoretically, they have not been very successful in achieving Beijing and Moscow's foreign policy objectives.

KEYWORDS: China; interpretivism; global order; socialism; foreign affairs; Russia.

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論 With the successful completion of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Party Congress in October 2022, many people are asking how it impacts Beijing's view of global order. Xi Jinping's *Report to the Party Congress* clearly states that the Party needs to take advantage of the strategic opportunities created by the passing of the American unipolar era in order to achieve the national rejuvenation of China. By the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049, Xi declares that China will be the leading power in the world (Xi, 2022, III). Even so, he recognizes that "regional conflicts and disturbances are frequent, and global issues are becoming more acute. The world has entered a new period of turbulence and change" that complicates Beijing's grand strategy of national rejuvenation to global leadership (Xi, 2022, III).

Curiously, Xi in his report did not mention Ukraine, Russia, the United States, or NATO. While China-Russia relations are often dismissed by many as merely an "axis of convenience," this article argues that we need to take them seriously because a comparison of Russian and Chinese political narratives can tell us much about Beijing's global order ideas (Cox, 2023; Lo, 2008). Indeed, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 complicated its relations not just with the United States, but also with China, leading to a growing congruence between Russian and Chinese global order ideas. Yet as Bandurski (2022) explains, it is in fact unsurprising for Xi's *Report to the Party Congress* not to mention current events since the purpose of such reports is to speak in terms of long-term trends, big ideas, and general goals. In line with its official style, this article does not search Xi's report for concrete foreign policy statements but examines the concepts that animate it, especially when they go beyond rationalist IR theories.

This article thus follows global IR to argue that it is important to understand Chinese global order ideas on their own terms (Achaya, 2014). In particular, it uses interpretivist theory and methods to examine how Xi's report interweaves the three narratives of *socialism*, *tradition*, and *nation* as seen in discussions of the socialist concept of "united front work" (統一戰線工作, *tongyi zhanxian gongzuo*), the traditional ideal of *tianxia* (天下, all under heaven), and the historiography of the *nation*.

With the passing of the American unipolar moment, many explain China-Russia relations in terms of a new China-Russia-U.S. strategic triangle of rational actors interacting according to realist game theory. The first section of this article critically analyzes this realist reasoning to consider how Chinese sources understand foreign affairs in terms of the socialist concept of "united front work." It argues that this approach better explains Chinese (and Russian) foreign policy in terms of short-term "tactical triangles" rather than the long-term strategic triangles of realism. To probe long-term global order ideas, the second section argues that it is profitable to examine how narratives of tradition provide alternative views of international politics that look beyond nation-states and international institutions: that is, the concentric circles model of global order seen in Chinese *tianxia* and Russian Eurasianism. To understand these competing Russocentric and Sinocentric global orders, the third section explores how each country's official historiography highlights narratives of the *nation* and especially how national rejuvenation requires correcting the "national humiliation" of lost territories in ways that call into question mainstream views of state sovereignty and inter-state relations.

One of the challenges of interpreting Chinese foreign affairs is how to weigh the relative importance of sources, including the often contradictory official statements made by Chinese leaders (see Miller, 2018). Many analysts see these three narratives in terms of a chronological linear progression—i.e., one from tradition to socialism to nationalism (see Doshi, 2021; Gries, 2004; S. Zhao, 2004)—with China now being seen as "post-socialist." Rather than employ a chronological history approach to see the PRC as such, Pieke (2016, pp. 8–12) proposes the concept of *neo-socialism* in order to appreciate how the PRC in the twenty-first century keeps syncretically reinventing itself by mixing the often contradictory ideologies of Chinese tradition, capitalist modernity, and socialist modernity. Neo-socialism is thus a "composite ideology" that works to address a wide array of opportunities and risks (Smith, 1986, p. 83). Pieke argues that while neo-socialism is full of contradictions, this can be a strength rather than a weakness.

This article develops Pieke's concept of neo-socialism to better understand Chinese global order ideas. Chinese approaches to global order are best grasped in terms of three overlapping narratives of socialism, tradition, and nation that are joined in a non-linear dynamic triad. Xi's speeches and PRC documents are full of references to each of these narratives. Researchers often find what they are looking for and thus argue that only one of these narratives is correct. For example, Doshi (2021, pp. 25–44) argues that nationalism trumps both socialism and tradition in elite Chinese policy documents. However, this article suggests that it is better to understand how the three can work both together and against each other. While these three narratives often contradict each other theoretically, they also coexist in dynamic tension in Chinese debates that seek to answer an enduring question posed by elite officials and scholars in the PRC: what is China's contribution to global order ideas? Indeed, the *Report to the Party Congress* repeatedly stresses the necessity to integrate socialism, tradition, and nation in Xi's new ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era" (Xi, 2022, I, II).

This article therefore argues that ideas and ideologies are important because they shape the way Chinese officials and scholars frame political problems and thus political solutions. It uses interpretive theory and methods to probe how Chinese global order ideas are emerging

out of current ideational debates in the PRC (see Callahan, 2020, pp. 46–57; Campbell, 1998; Johnston, 2013). As the prominent scholar-official Qin Yaqing puts it, the heart of Chinese foreign policy is not a realist security dilemma but an interpretivist "identity dilemma": who is China, and how does it see global order (2006, p. 13)? At the end of his 2023 Moscow visit, Xi Jinping provisionally answered Qin's question when he told Vladimir Putin, "Change is coming that hasn't happened in a hundred years, and we are driving this change together" (Kynge, 2023).

This article first concludes that further research is necessary to examine the interrelation of these three narratives: while nation and tradition are primarily employed to support the overarching narrative of socialism in recent years, this could certainly change. The conclusion then argues that while these narratives may be coherent theoretically, they have not been very successful in achieving Beijing and Moscow's foreign policy objectives.

Socialism: From Strategic Triangles to Tactical Triangles

It is popular to understand U.S.-China relations in terms of the strategic triangle of U.S.-China-Russia relations in which states interact as rational actors in a game. The strategic triangle concept emerged during the Nixon administration in the early 1970s to explain the shifting relationship between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union (Dittmer, 1981, pp. 495, 498–499, 2018, p. 65; Pu & Peng, 1997, p. 612). The concept seeks to explain international politics that are neither bilateral nor multilateral relations and involve tactics that go beyond balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging (Dittmer, 2018, pp. 6–11). Dittmer (2018, p. 11) explains that game theory in a strategic triangle requires three conditions: (1) the three participants must be sovereign, rational actors; (2) each actor needs to calculate its relations with the two other actors in mind; and (3) each is seen as significant enough that its "defection from one side to the other would critically shift the strategic balance."

The goal of this game is to be the "pivot" of the triangle that has good relations with both other countries while the triangle's other two "wings" do not have good relations with each other (Dittmer, 1981, 2018, p. 65; Rozman, 2020). Hence, Washington in the 1970s and early 1980s benefited as the pivot that had close relations with Beijing and cordial relations with Moscow while Beijing and Moscow were hostile toward each other. Now in the 2020s, Beijing has become the pivot with close relations with Moscow and cool but steady relations with Washington while Washington and Moscow are on opposite sides of the war in Ukraine. Policy elites see these relations as a strategic triangle because they argue that since China is an existential threat to the United States, Washington should cultivate relations with Moscow in order to isolate Beijing (Mearsheimer, 2021). This underlines how a strategic triangle is not concerned with ideology, culture, or values but is best understood in terms of universalist game theory where the three states are rational actors pursuing national interests.

Dittmer's (2018, p. 59) "great strategic triangle" of U.S.-China-Russia relations is significant because it has much to tell us about Chinese global order ideas. Strategists in Beijing also tend to think of geopolitics in terms of triangles, with one well-placed Chinese scholar declaring in 2021 that "the 'strategic triangle' between China, the United States, and Russia has become the 'hot topic' in Chinese academic circles" (Li, 2021, p. 15; also see Bi, 2022; Chen, 2019; A. Hou, 2021; X. Hu, 2020; Ma & Li, 2003; Pu & Peng, 1997, p. 612). Yet rather than being rational actors, here strategic triangles often speak to historically and culturally Chinese ways of understanding international politics, especially during the Warring States period (475 BCE–221 BCE) and the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that was valued by Mao Zedong for its strategic lessons (Armstrong, 1977, p. 14; Rozman, 2022, p. 6).

China’s 20th-century experience also demonstrates a rich history of strategic triangles long before Nixon arrived in 1972: it joined with the United States in World War II to fight Imperial Japan, leaned towards Russia when it signed a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union in 1950 to counter the United States, and then shifted toward the United States to counter the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Since the 2010s, many have seen a revival of the logic of strategic triangles in the China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that as Putin and Xi Jinping declared just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has “no limits” (Chen, 2019; Dittmer, 2018; A. Hou, 2021; President of Russia, 2022; Rozman, 2022).

The question remains, however: are these triangles truly long-term grand strategies, or are they better understood as short- and medium-term tactics, i.e. as tactical triangles in a shifting strategic ecosystem? More importantly, are tactical triangles best explained through universalist IR theory that explains behavior in terms of rational action rather than with reference to the specifics of ideology, culture, and history in 20th and 21st-century China?

Tactical Triangles and United Front Work

Rather than think about strategic triangles in terms of game theory that presents itself as non-ideological, this sub-section explores what happens when we shift the theoretical focus to value the very ideological socialist concept of “united front work.” This communist party concept is shared by China and Russia: it was created by Lenin in 1920 and then developed through Soviet and Chinese practice (see Armstrong, 1977; Brady, 2017, pp. 1–11; Lenin, 1950, p. 91; Men & Yu, 2022; Mo, 2019). The logic of united front work is to join with one group of “friends” in order to isolate and struggle against another group of “enemies.” As Mao Zedong famously wrote in 1927, “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution” (Mao, 1927).

The logic of united front work is to see the world in terms of Marxist dialectical materialism where historical change is powered by contradictions and struggle. Importantly, it is the job of party leaders to assess the current situation so as to determine the difference between “antagonistic contradictions” that entail life-and-death struggles and “non-antagonistic contradictions” that are important but not existential threats. In united front work, the party forms alliances with non-communist groups—“friends” with whom it has non-antagonistic contradictions—in order to fight and defeat “enemies,” other groups with whom it has antagonistic contradictions. After these enemies are defeated, the party then assesses the situation to redetermine the current antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions, often targeting old friends as new enemies (Armstrong, 1977, p. 36). United front work thus involves a “limited and temporary alignment between the Communist party or state and one or more non-Communist political units with a dual purpose, on the Communist side, of confronting a common enemy and furthering the revolutionary cause” (Armstrong, 1977, p. 13). The purpose of this revolutionary cause is to seize power in domestic and international politics. It thus is an ideological tactic for an ideological strategy: the final victory of the Communist Party over all its foes, foreign and domestic. For Mao and Xi Jinping, united front work is crucial: both see it as one of the CCP’s three “magic weapons” alongside party-building and armed struggle (Brady, 2017, p. 7; Groot, 2018).

The CCP learned its united front tactics from Soviet advisors sent to China by the Communist International (Comintern). The CCP itself can even be seen as a united front work project of the Comintern, whose advisors aided its founding and development in the 1920s and 1930s as a way of cultivating friends and isolating enemies in China. Soviet advisors pushed the newly-formed CCP to join the Nationalist Party (KMT) in a united front in 1924 to fight against China’s warlords. This united front worked until Chiang Kai-shek broke the pact and attacked the communists in Shanghai in 1927, pushing the KMT and the CCP into civil war.

Yet pressured by the existential threat of the Japanese invasion of China (and pressured by the Comintern as well), the KMT and CCP in 1936 decided to stop fighting each other and form a united front against Tokyo. The antagonistic contradiction between the CCP and the KMT re-emerged once Japan was defeated, and the CCP again united with non-communist groups to fight against the KMT. Since the CCP defeated the KMT and came to power in 1949, united front work has continued in both domestic and international politics (see Armstrong, 1977; Brady, 2017, 2019; Groot, 2004, 2018).

In the PRC, united front work is mostly seen in domestic politics where it is used to cultivate cooperative ties with groups such as China's eight official non-communist parties, people from non-Han ethnic groups, religious leaders, and non-party intellectuals. It is led by the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and works through organizations like the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC).

United front work is limited neither to the UFWD nor to domestic politics, however. Since united front work is the duty of every CCP member all the time, we should see it in terms of a broader definition where the task is "to bolster the legitimacy, longevity, and strategic interests of the CCP by promoting and protecting the Party's image, record, and policy preferences including through monitoring, deflection, and suppression of criticism and contrary positions" (Gill & Schreer, 2018, p. 157). In international politics, united front work is "primarily aimed at shaping the *political* environment within target countries" to promote the needs of the CCP, both for legitimacy at home and strategic interests abroad (Gill & Schreer, 2018, p. 157; see also Brady, 2017, 2019; Dotson, 2019; Fedasiuk, 2022; Huang, 2022; Thornton, 2023). The objective of international united front work is thus to "guide, buy and coerce political influence abroad" (Brady, 2017, p. 2). While it became less important under the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations, according to Gerry Groot and others, we have seen a "rise and rise of united front work under Xi" (Groot, 2018; see also Brady, 2019; Men & Li, 2021). Indeed, Xi's *Report to the 20th Party Congress* has a whole subsection devoted to it (Xi, 2022, VI:4).

While we commonly understand international united front work in terms of co-opting overseas Chinese communities and the "elite capture" of non-ethnic Chinese in foreign countries, I suggest that we use the logic of united front work to understand China's inter-state tactical triangle activities that also involve a "limited and temporary alignment" between the PRC and other countries (Armstrong, 1977, pp. 13, 24–27). Many PRC-based scholars understand "international united front work" in terms of China's currying favor with other countries through the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's many strategic partnerships (see Feng & Huang, 2014; X. Guo, 2019; Men & Yu, 2022). Chiung-Chiu Huang (2022) thus explains how international united front work is useful for cultivating friends for China in international politics because it doesn't demand that countries like those of Southeast Asia choose sides between the PRC and the United States.

While Chinese sources would agree, they also stress how their country's international united front work operates in a dialectical way to both cultivate friends and isolate and attack "enemies" like the United States (see X. Hu, 2020; Men, 2021; Men & Li, 2021; Zheng, 2023). Indeed, we can use united front work to explain much of Beijing's diplomacy: it sees third countries like Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea primarily in terms of their ties to the United States and urges them to have "independent" foreign policies, meaning policies that are independent of Washington. The goal is to split off U.S. allies, and this is not necessarily to make them Chinese allies but at least to make them neutral in any U.S.-China struggle. If they recognize and support China's "core interests" in international fora, that is an added bonus. This diplomatic logic is not understood by officials and scholars in the PRC in terms of the balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging of realism but in terms of concepts used by the socialist theory and practice of united front work, a quasi-ideological tactic for a highly ideological goal

(see Men & Yu, 2022; Mo, 2019). This attention to socialist concepts suggests that to understand Chinese foreign affairs, it is best to put aside realism's universals of "rational actors" to appreciate how modernity in China has been experienced through global ideologies. China's political logic is one of a dialectical struggle found in socialist parties with the ultimate goal of ideological victory.

While the current tactical triangle can be seen as a counter-hegemonic system since it unites China with its Russian "friend" to work against a common American "enemy" (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023), strategic elites in Beijing also look away from triangles and towards concentric circles to envision a new hegemony that locates China at the center of the world.

Tradition: The Concentric Circles of *Tianxia* and Eurasianism

In the first section, I argued that we should take socialist concepts seriously and not be distracted by appeals to China's "post-Socialist" transition first to nationalism in the 1990s and now to Chinese tradition in the 21st century (Doshi, 2021, pp. 27–29). Yet *chuantong* [傳統, tradition] is still important in Chinese elite discussions of global order so long as it is understood in dynamic tension with socialism and nation and not as a radical alternative to them.

Hence, it is important to examine how traditional ideas are re-emerging in China as part of the CCP's neo-socialist understanding of politics and the world. Beyond the united front work of tactical triangles, another way of thinking about China-Russia relations is in terms of circles, especially the concentric circles of *tianxia* [天下, all under heaven], China's alternative world order. Russia and China are united in the current tactical triangle not just by concerns about U.S. unipolarity but also by a distaste for liberalism, which both countries see as an ideological threat working to overthrow them through a "color revolution" like the one seen in Ukraine in 2014 (Clowes, 2011; Dittmer, 2018, p. 85; President of Russia, 2022; Putin, 2014, 2021; Rozman, 2022; Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021; J. Wang, 2021; Zheng, 2023). Moscow generally fights against liberalism by using "sharp power" tactics to sow division and conflict in democratic societies (Walker, 2018). We saw this in 2016 when Moscow worked to undermine the U.S. presidential election. Russia's media outlets don't provide information so much as spread conspiracy theories, and this negative tactic generally doesn't provide an alternative ideology or value system that is attractive to outsiders.

Figure 1
Tianxia Map

Source: Cheonhado (c. 19th century).

Chinese scholars and officials, on the other hand, often present a positive ideological alternative in the form of *tianxia*. The best way to explain *tianxia* is to look at a Tianxia Map from the 19th century (Cheonhado, c. 19th century). Firstly, it is a territorial map that places China at the center of the world. It is also a civilizational map that shows China as the center of global human civilization, which fades out to barbarism at its periphery. Lastly, it is a religious map in that China is placed at the center of the universe, the cosmological node that joins heaven, earth, and humanity (Callahan, in press). In this way, *tianxia* is a long-term cosmological strategy rather than a short- or medium-term geopolitical tactic. While cosmological politics may seem far-fetched, Shue (2022, pp. 681–682) argues that it is necessary to understand Chinese politics in the twenty-first century in "the cosmic frame." When seen in this way, there is a shift from the tactical maneuverings of three sovereign states to a global order centered on one cosmological nodal tradition. Rather than China being at the pivot of two wings in a tactical triangle, *tianxia* places Beijing at the pivot of the entire cosmos.

Although *tianxia* is part of Chinese exceptionalism (see Ho, 2021), it is certainly not unique. Rather than accept mainstream IR theory's understanding of the world as a collection of legally equal nation-states with clear boundaries, most pre-modern polities in Asia and Europe had a cosmological view of themselves, and the world was organized around centers, peripheries, and circles (Branch, 2014, pp. 43–50). One ancient Indian strategy and worldview, for example, looks to the concentric circles of the Mandala system (see Kautilya, 2016). What is important, however, is how elites in China are reviving *tianxia* to speak to current concerns. Though it was created in the 19th century, the Tianxia Map has become relevant again as the

ancient Chinese global order idea of All-under-Heaven has been rebooted to solve the world's problems in the twenty-first century. The map is on the cover of the English-language translation of Zhao Tingyang's *The Tianxia System* (2021a), a highly influential work on *tianxia* as the world order for the 21st century. Zhao and others tell us that the *tianxia* system is better than the current liberal world order because it offers "peace, general security, and civilizational vigor" (T. Zhao, 2021b, p. 27; see also Callahan, 2008; B. Wang, 2017). Rather than look to individuals or nation-states as the focus of politics, *tianxia* makes us think about the world's problems from the perspective of the whole world. Yet as the Tianxia Map reminds us, this is a hierarchical system that puts Beijing at its center and exports Chinese ideas of order and governance to the rest of the globe.

If this sounds like imperialism, it is because the historical Chinese empire is increasingly presented in Beijing as the ideal model for a future global order (see Jiang, 2019; T. Zhao, 2021a). *Tianxia*'s concentric circles also resonate with Xi's understanding of the CCP's role at the center of everything: "Party, government, military, civilian, and academic; east, west, south, north, and center, the Party leads everything" (Gao, 2017; see also Mo, 2019). Rather than joining with temporary friends in a strategic triangle for a tactical advantage, the *tianxia* system starts at the center in Beijing and then spreads civilization and empire out to the world. We can see this logic in a question asked by Zhao Tingyang (2018) in the *Washington Post*: "Can China's 'tianxia' philosophy save us from growing global chaos?" Xi Jinping answered that "great harmony under heaven" (天下大同, *tianxia datong*) is the goal of his idea of a new global order, the "community of shared fate for mankind [sic]" (人類命運共同體, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*) ("Weile Geng Meihao De Shijie," 2021). Importantly, Xi lauded *tianxia* as part of his speech celebrating the centenary of the founding of the CCP. While mainstream views of ideology suggest that socialism and tradition are in opposition, here tradition helps socialism as part of Chinese neo-socialism. Rather than multilateral or multipolar, *tianxia* is robustly unipolar: there is only one tradition, one center, and as the slogan for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics declares: "one world, one dream" (China Culture, 2008).

Interestingly, post-Soviet ideology in Russia runs along similar lines that help us to further understand Chinese global order ideas. Putin's Eurasian ideology presents a Russocentric view of the world. As Clowes (2011, p. 2) explains, while Soviet ideology focused on "time" to promise a utopian socialist future, post-Soviet ideology focuses on "space" to highlight territorial identity in terms of the centers and peripheries of the Russocentric world. In other words, while the Soviet Union saw itself at the center of a bipolar world during the Cold War, Russia in the 1990s was generally seen as peripheral to the Western world (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 4). Especially with Putin since 2000, important voices have worked to reassert Russia as the center of its region and the world. This includes the work of Dugin (2014), who writes about the Russocentrism of "neo-Eurasianism" that seeks to expand Russian influence beyond the territorial boundaries of the Russian Federation to reclaim the "imagined geography" of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Clowes, 2011, pp. 43–67; Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017, p. 430; Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 5).

Much like *tianxia*, neo-Eurasianism appeals to tradition to see Russia as the territorial, civilizational, and cosmological center. While it is common among Russian intellectuals to see the Mongolian Golden Horde's three-century occupation of Russia as a horrible national humiliation, Dugin and others look to the expansive logic of the Mongolian empire as a model for Russian administration and empire-building (Clowes, 2011, pp. 51–52; Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017, p. 434). Indeed, the Mongolians are also attractive to neo-Eurasianists because they provide a non-Western ideological template for political order. Much like Jiang's (2019) promotion of the concept of empire for China's ideal model of global order, Dugin declares that empire is "Russia's geopolitical idea, its calling, its fate" (cited in Clowes, 2011,

p. 58). Dugin thus sees Russocentrism not just in terms of territory but in terms of Russian tradition and the cosmological unity of the Russian Orthodox Church that locates Eurasia at "the sacred center of the world" (Clowes, 2011, p. 43).

Although there are debates over the influence of Dugin, it's important to note that Putin has adopted the idea of Eurasianism as part of his ideology (Clowes, 2011, p. 46; Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017, p. 430). Indeed, Putin (2021, p. 2) explains how Russia can't be Russian without Kyiv: "Kyiv is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other" (Putin, 2014). Kyiv is central in the Eurasianist narrative because it is seen as the birthplace of Russian Orthodox civilization (Clowes, 2011, p. 10; Putin, 2014, 2021). Here the cosmological power of the Russian Orthodox Church radiates out to the territories of the former Soviet Union and beyond (Putin, 2014, 2021; Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021).

Comparing Chinese and Russian models of global concentric circles helps us to better understand Beijing and Moscow's shared notion of the rejuvenation of traditional civilization whose rise is predicated on the simultaneous fall of the West into immoral corruption (Clowes, 2011; Dugin, 2014; Putin, 2021; Rozman, 2022; Zheng, 2023). Both Russia and China have very traditional patriarchal views of society, and there is a moral panic in both countries about gender roles, with Russia officially outlawing "gay propaganda" in 2013 and Beijing banning mass media images of "sissy men" in 2021 (Clowes, 2011, p. 63; Cooper-Cunningham, 2022; T. Hu et al., 2023; Xu, 2022). Indeed, Xi Jinping's explanation for the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 is similarly gendered: he said that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union collapsed because "nobody was man enough to stand up and resist" ("Naner Xi," 2013).

Rather than see international conflict in terms of clashing nation-states, this traditional view of global order sees civilizations as the sites of conflict. These civilizations are Chinese, Russian, and liberal, which is not seen as universal but as limited to Euro-America. If this logic of inter-civilizational conflict sounds like Huntington's (1996) *Clash of Civilizations*, this is because a civilizational understanding of world order is very popular among conservatives and reactionaries around the globe. It is popular in Beijing and Moscow because it gives recognition and respect to what such elites see as their core traditions, which are figured as radically different from "Western" liberal-cosmopolitan civilization (see Clowes, 2011, p. 67; Dugin, 2014; Jacques, 2009; Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 5; J. Wang, 1995, pp. 23–25). Using the narrative of tradition thus helps us to get beyond realism's focus on the nation-state and liberalism's attention to multilateral regimes to appreciate the international politics of civilizations that expand from cosmological capitals in concentric circles to claim sacred territories beyond the legalistic boundaries of the nation-state. Indeed, the tradition narrative could provoke problems in China-Russia relations because there has been friction between their imperial peripheries from the 17th century up to the present day (Mancall, 1971).

As China's role moves from that of a rule-taker to a rule-maker, it is exporting not merely goods but also norms and standards as a positive mode of power projection and global order-building (see Xi, 2022). This grand strategy for global order is not counter-hegemonic but speaks to China's new hegemony that looks to the narratives of socialism and tradition that animate neo-socialism.

Nation: Historiographies, Humiliations, and Lost Territories

To make sense of the *traditional* world order of concentric circles, it is helpful to shift back from space to time in order to consider the history and historiography of the *nation*. While it is common to understand "history" as a discipline and an entity that is based on discovering objective facts, "historiography" highlights how scholars have to make sense of the mass of

these historical facts by telling a story. This is political in the sense that we have to choose which story to tell, which means that we are at the same time choosing to not tell all the other possible ones (White, 1973, pp. 8–12). Hence, when Xi Jinping orders us "to tell a good China story, and to tell it well," he is being a historiographer who emplots the narrative to tell a story of a particular kind. Indeed, *lishi* (歷史, history) is one of the most common words in Xi's (2022) *Report to the 20th Party Congress* in which history/historiography is employed to make sense of the entangled narratives of socialism, tradition, and nation. This sense of historiography is also what Mayer (2018) means by China's "historical statecraft" where Beijing uses history not to reveal the truth but for geopolitical ends.

In both Russia and China, there is a very strong, popular, and official historiography that looks to themes of national rejuvenation, national humiliation, and lost territories (Callahan, 2009, 2020; Clowes, 2011; Dugin, 2014; Q. Guo, 1996; J. Hou & Dang, 2001; X. Hu, 2020; Putin, 2021; "Russia's Past," 2007; S. Zhao, 2004). This historiography grows out of tradition's concentric circles view of world politics that relies on stories of civilization and barbarism. As mentioned above, Putin (2014, 2021) feels that Russia can't be Russian without Kyiv. Ukrainian independence is therefore seen as the national humiliation of lost territories because for Putin, Ukraine does not exist as the site of an independent language, culture, nationality, or country. Like fake news, Ukraine is a "fake country." Indeed, Putin even refers to Ukraine as Malorossia (Little Russia) (Putin, 2021). Here Ukraine is the heart of Russia because it is the original site of the Russian Orthodox Church, which spread out to form Russian civilization. In this narrative, Ukraine was stolen away from Russia in the 1990s by evil foreign powers and the Bolsheviks who naively misunderstood geopolitics when they recognized Ukraine as a separate republic in the 1920s (Putin, 2014, 2021).

Figure 2
Europe in 2035

Note. "Europe in 2035" was originally three separate maps. The author has put them together for this figure.
Source: "Rossiya" (2012).

The loss of Ukraine is understood in terms of a larger experience of lost territories at the end of the Cold War, first with the loss of Eastern Europe followed by that of the fifteen non-Russian republics (Clowes, 2011, p. 5). According to Putin, the "collapse of the Soviet Union

was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century. For the Russian people, it became a real tragedy. Tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory. This epidemic of disintegration also spread to Russia itself" (cited in Bigg, 2005). This dynamic of remembering dismembered territories can be seen in Russian "imagined geographies" that reverse the expansive logic of the Tianxia Map to show peripheral territories shedding from a shrinking Russia. Here Russia is presented as a weak periphery, rather than as the cosmic center (see Clowes, 2011, pp. 1–18). This is a "national humiliation" because it is the result of Russian leaders allowing the West in the 1990s to enter and prey upon Russia economically while breaking it up territorially, and according to Moscow's narrative, the West continues to do through NATO's support for Ukraine.

How should patriotic Russians deal with such national humiliations? Neo-Eurasianism seeks to reverse Russia's disintegration in order to re-assert Moscow as the territorial and civilizational center, in an expansive process that works to include the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and more (Clowes, 2011; Dugin, 2014). In the past decade, Russian elites have looked to irredentism to reclaim lost territories that were "stolen" by foreigners (Dugin, 2014). We can see this in Figure 2's set of three maps called "Europe in 2035" which was published in 2012 in the prominent Russian newspaper *Express Gazeta* ("Rossiya," 2012). In general, the maps show Western European nation-states fracturing along subnational lines while Russian territory grows to include much of the former Soviet Union, most of Ukraine, and all of Belarus. Here countries that have been "disloyal" to Moscow are dismembered, especially Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. As Jacobs (2014) concluded in an online article about the maps in *Foreign Policy*, "This cartographic fantasy panders to Russia's foreign-policy frustrations by predicting future defeats for its 'enemies' and future victories for itself." Indeed, these maps successfully predicted Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Such maps which illustrate debates among Russia's foreign policy elite show how Russia's historiography of national humiliation creates and legitimates possibilities for the national irridentism seen in its war in Ukraine.

Chinese Historiographies of National Humiliation and Lost Territories

Chinese officials and scholars also employ historiography to make sense of China and global order. The current official historiography emerged from the other grand event of 1989: the Tiananmen movement. After the bloody crackdown, Deng Xiaoping met with his generals to determine what went wrong. Deng (1989) decided that it wasn't a question of democracy vs. authoritarianism, because the problem was "primarily in ideological and political education—not just of students but of the people in general." Deng felt that China's youth had been brainwashed by the West into blaming the CCP for China's problems. Beijing thus formulated a new patriotic education policy to shift the focus of attention among its youth away from domestic issues and toward foreigners as enemies (Callahan, 2009; Gries, 2004; S. Zhao, 2004). The patriotic education campaign tells the story of the "century of national humiliation" from the Opium War in 1839 to the communist revolution in 1949 in which China was attacked, occupied, and dismembered by Western and Japanese imperialists. As *National Humiliation, Hatred and the Soul of China* summarizes China's painful century:

> [I]n modern Chinese history since the Opium War, foreign powers have launched invasion after invasion, act after bloody act of coercive pillage, occupying Chinese sovereign territory, slaughtering the Chinese masses, looting China's wealth, and stealing China's cultural artifacts. All this stained China with blood and tears. (J. Hou & Dang, 2001, p. 1)

This version of modern Chinese history is not simply a recording of historical facts. It is a moral historiography that narrates China's "fall and rise" rather than its "rise and fall." Most

textbooks begin by stating how China went from being the world's most advanced civilization to becoming the "sick man of Asia." The conclusion is that China is destined to rejuvenate and reclaim its rightful place at the center of global civilization: as one book title declares, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Recreating the Glory* (Q. Guo, 1996). Indeed, Xi Jinping underlined this "fall and rise" narrative in his November 2012 speech that introduced his concept of the "China Dream of national rejuvenation." Xi broached this idea at the end of the National Museum's Road to Rejuvenation exhibit, a key site for both the patriotic education campaign and the historiography of national humiliation ("Fuxing," 2011; H. Hu et al., 1998; Xi, 2012). In this way, nation and tradition work together by reasserting *tianxia* as the ideal model for global order that solves the problem of the century of national humiliation. Nation also works with socialism because the historiography often employs a Marxist understanding of imperialism as bourgeois capitalism's political-economic struggle for new markets (see Renmin Chubanshe Ditushi, 2005, pp. 3–4).

Hence, while the *history* of the century of national humiliation ended with the CCP's victory in 1949, its *historiography* was revived in the 1990s. As historiography, the ongoing patriotic education campaign doesn't just describe history but continually produces themes of national humiliation to frame Chinese understandings not only of the past, but more importantly of the present and the future. Indeed, Xi (2012) actually begins his China Dream speech by declaring that patriotic history "is about the past, present, and future of the Chinese nation."

Xi's historiography thus works in ways that are similar to Putin's. For Xi, national rejuvenation likewise involves the recovery of dismembered territories. This explains Beijing's policies toward Hong Kong in 2019 and toward Taiwan for the past decade. Like with Ukraine, Hong Kong and Taiwan aren't seen as real places with different languages, cultures, histories, identities, and nationalities. Xi sees them as "fake countries" that need to be reunified with China for their own good and by force if necessary. The official view in Beijing is that hostile foreign forces are responsible for misleading otherwise patriotic compatriots in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Xi, 2022, XIII).

Figure 3

Map of China's Lost Sovereign Land and Maritime Territories

Source: Xie (1927).

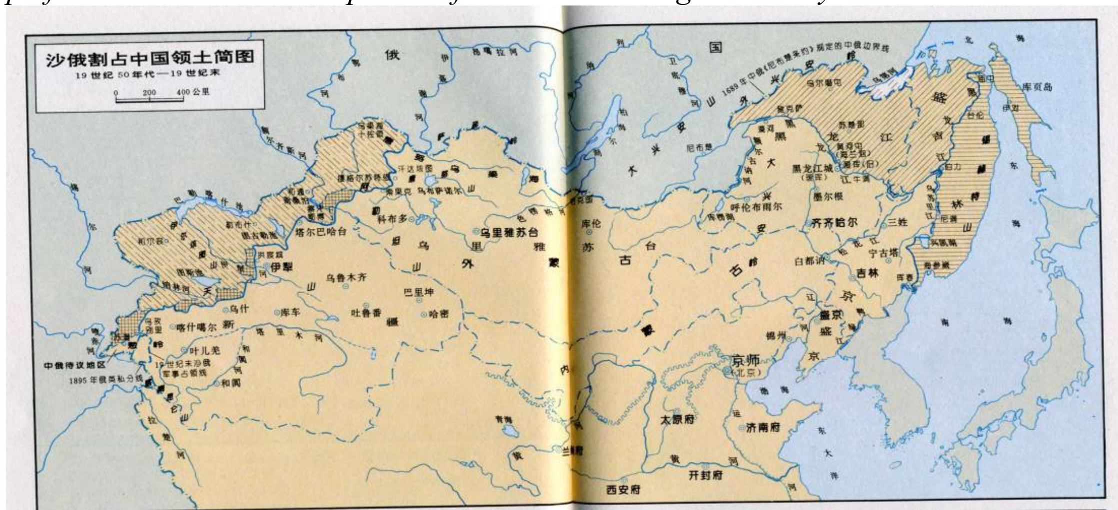
This does not merely include Hong Kong and Taiwan (or Tibet, and Xinjiang), however: as Figure 3's "Map of China's Lost Sovereign Land and Maritime Territories" (Xie, 1927) shows, China's many "national humiliation maps" (國恥圖, *guochi tu*) and "maps of lost territories" (喪地圖, *sangdi tu*) from the first half of the 20th century assert Chinese claims to "stolen territories" from all its neighbors, including Russia. While China officially settled its border issues with the Russian Federation in 2004, recent maps suggest that China still claims all of the Russian Far East as well as vast territories in Central Asia that were stolen by Czarist Russia and then occupied by the Soviet Union and Russian Federation. Figure 4 is from *Maps of the Century of National Humiliation of Modern China*, which was published in Beijing by China's official cartographic press in 1997 and then republished in 2005 after the borders were legally settled. Figure 3's map of China's lost territories from 1927 was republished in the PRC in 2014 (Xie, 2014). Hence, in textbooks and atlases, people in the PRC are told that evil Russians stole over 1.5 million square kilometers of China's sacred territory (Renmin Chubanshe Ditushi, 2005, pp. 25–26; see also Kilpatrick, 2023; Zhou & Zhang, 1998, p. 1).

While most of the blame is placed on Czarist Russia (J. Hou & Dang, 2001, pp. 43–51, 55–56; Q. Guo, 1996, pp. 67–68), many textbooks discussing the history of national humiliation also criticize the *Treaty of Friendship and Alliance* signed in 1945 between the

Republic of China and the Soviet Union as China's final "unequal treaty." It is seen as particularly heinous because it forced China to recognize the independence of the Mongolian People's Republic, which Russia stole from China according to national humiliation historiography (J. Wang, 2000, p. 354). This suggests that China's national humiliation of lost territories is a matter of not just of the history of the nation, but also of the historiography of the nation, as China's ongoing patriotic education campaign also targets Russia. In terms of national humiliation's view of lost territories, we are continually told that Russia is the greatest thief (Kilpatrick, 2023).

Figure 4

Map of Czarist Russia's Occupation of China's Sovereign Territory



Source: Renmin Chubanshe Ditushi (2005, pp. 25–26).

How are we to understand Chinese historiography of the nation? Certainly, we could see it in terms of the tactical triangles of united front work in which the CCP leadership through its patriotic education campaign stirs up popular sentiment against current enemies and in support of current friends. That is essentially what Beijing is doing when it spreads Moscow's narrative that blames NATO for provoking the Ukraine war in 2022 (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Rozman (2022, pp. 30–31) thus argues that although Russian and Chinese elites have a significant "national identity gap," the two states effectively downplay any negative narratives of Russian-Chinese conflict. In this way, Russia and China use historiography to band together as friends in a classic united front tactic in order to struggle against the American enemy.

Alongside this socialist united front work, historiographies of the nation also work to reproduce tradition's concentric circles of civilization. Comparing the Tianxia Map and China's maps of national humiliation, it is clear that both work according to the same logic of China as the civilized center (Callahan, 2020, pp. 147–177). Even though China now treats Russia as a friend in the united front against the American enemy, popular anger against Russia persists in China. When the Russian embassy in Beijing tweeted a message celebrating the 160th anniversary of the founding of the city of Vladivostok in 2020, it provoked an angry response from Chinese netizens that included Hu Xijin, the former editor of the Communist Party tabloid *Global Times*. Hu Xijin (2020) used the historiography of the century of national humiliation to criticize Russian expansionism and even declared that Chinese patriots should refuse to use the name "Vladivostok" because the Russian embassy had explained it means "rule of the East." As the city and region were stolen from China according to the narrative, Hu advocated that the city should be called by its Chinese name of Haishenwei (海参崴) (X.

Hu, 2020; see also Rozman, 2020). A similar episode erupted during Xi's visit to Moscow in 2023 when a Chinese celebrity comedian demanded that the PRC correct the enduring national humiliation of Russia's unequal treaties and return over 1 million square kilometers of lost territories (Kilpatrick, 2023). Once again, the party-state had to step in to silence these popular voices.

It is certainly true that the Chinese party-state adjusts its historiographical narrative to suit its current political needs—i.e., to target the United States rather than Russia. But popular demands for the return of territories stolen by Russia along with the maps of national humiliation discussed above suggest that the historiography of the nation should also be appreciated as part of China's global order ideas. Indeed, we should remember that historiographies of national humiliation and lost territories speak to clashes of civilizations between competing traditions: i.e., clashes not just between China and the West, but also between China and Russia (Mancall, 1971). As mentioned above, nation works with tradition in the sense that the preferred way to resolve the problem of the century of national humiliation is to reassert *tianxia* as the ideal model for global order.

Conclusion

This article has argued that we need to take Chinese ideas of global order seriously, especially when they go beyond rationalist IR theory. It has done so by looking at three narratives that come from Xi's *Report to the 20th Party Congress* and other official sources: the socialism of united front work, the tradition of *tianxia*, and the historiography of the nation. Rather than arguing that only one of these three narratives is correct, this paper shows that it is better to understand them as three overlapping narratives of socialism, tradition, and nation in dynamic tension. This non-linear approach that compares Chinese and Russian global order ideas is also methodological in the sense that it aims to momentarily set aside rationalist IR's guiding concepts such as strategic triangles, balancing, or hedging to better appreciate the narratives employed by Chinese officials and scholars. Rather than understand this as a linear chronological transition from socialism to nationalism to Chinese tradition, I follow Pieke to understand it as an example of "neo-socialism": a syncretic integration of contradictory narratives of Chinese global order. This exploration of the dynamic triad of socialism, tradition, and nation suggests that rather than be limited by mainstream IR's universals of "rational actors," it is helpful to understand Chinese foreign affairs through the composite ideology of neo-socialism that appeals to particularly Chinese ideological, cultural, and historical experiences of modernity. Indeed, the comparison with Russia's parallel narratives helps to flesh out Chinese global order ideas.

Neo-socialism is also an appropriate concept because rather than figure socialism as a spent ideology, it appreciates how it keeps reinventing itself to guide China's composite ideology. This is not surprising because Xi Jinping has worked to reinvigorate and recentralize the role of the CCP in Chinese foreign affairs. As Xi's speeches show, tradition and nation are characteristically positioned not as radical alternatives to socialism but as narratives that promote his new ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era" ("Weile Geng Meihao De Shijie," 2021; Xi, 2022). Yet because the three narratives are in dynamic tension, we should also watch for signs of a shift in emphasis, in which tradition or nation might start to dominate this dynamic triad.

While these three narratives are generally coherent theoretically, how successful have they been for Chinese and Russian foreign policy on the ground? While the outcome of the Russian war in Ukraine is unclear as of April 2023, the major failures of Russian foreign policy are evident. Moscow started the war to show NATO's weakness and arrest its expansion, but

NATO's response has been active and unified, and Russia's previously neutral neighboring countries where provoked by the Russian invasion to join NATO. In other words, it is unlikely that Moscow will be able to achieve its Russocentric neo-Eurasian political goals.

It is commonly understood that Beijing is benefiting from Russia's war in Ukraine: it is the pivot of a new China-U.S.-Russia strategic triangle, and a weakened Russia allows China to gain even more status and power. Beijing also seeks to reap the benefits of presenting itself as "neutral" in the conflict and thus a force for global peace. But as often happens in triangular relationships, neither Moscow nor Washington is satisfied with what Beijing has to offer. In light of disrupted supply chains in Russia, many European countries (and companies) are rethinking their deep economic and political engagement with the PRC. More importantly, it is common to draw parallels between Moscow's view of Ukraine and Beijing's view of Taiwan. As we have seen in the past few years, many countries (and peoples) are rallying to Taiwan's aid in the face of a possible Chinese invasion. Hence, the Ukraine war has both reinvigorated NATO and alliances in the Indo-Pacific, particularly those with the United States.

It seems that the Chinese foreign policy concepts examined in this article–i.e., the united front work of socialism, the *tianxia* of tradition, and the historiography of the nation—are not working to build strong relationships with Beijing's neighbors in Asia or with countries farther afield. It will be interesting to see if Beijing is able to use these concepts, which figure China as a suspicious and wounded nation entitled to be the cosmological pivot of the globe, to build Xi Jinping's "community of shared fate for mankind [sic]." In other words, are these concepts helping to build China's new global order or a new global disorder?

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