

Revisionism in China's foreign policy; Progressive adherence

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article Main Object: International relations Scope: China Received: 05 July 2025 Revised: 03 August 2025 Accepted: 11 August 2025 Published online: 06 September 2025 Keywords: brokerage revisionist, integrated revisionist, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, Xi Jinping.	The history of international politics confirms that, simultaneously with the decline of a unit(s) and the rise of another state(s) within the context of the existing order, a set of confrontations and power relations are formed in different directions, the outcome of which has manifested and emerged in a range from the continuation of the previous order to its change. This is also relevant to the rise of China in the post-Cold War era and how its foreign policy is regulated in the face of the neoliberal order led by the United States. This article, assuming a revisionist approach in China's foreign policy, emphasizes a range of different notions and signifiers of revisionism; therefore, seeks to answer the question of which of the revisionist notions and signifiers can describe China's foreign policy approach as a rising power? The research hypothesis is that China's revisionist preferences in foreign policy constituted under the existing institutional order, and in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, they have evolved from integrated revisionism to the brokerage revisionism. To examine the hypothesis, China's foreign policy during the three presidencies of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping is analyzed using the process tracing method.

Cite this article: Khosravi A, Ajdari AH. (2026). "Revisionism in China's foreign policy; Progressive adherence". *Countries Studies*. 4(2): 89-94. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2025.397953.1314>.



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 Website: <https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/> | Email: jcountst@ut.ac.ir |
 EISSN: 2980-9193
 Publisher: University of Tehran

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Extended Abstract

Background

China become a growing great power since the People's Republic of China (PRC) came to power. Currently, the country influences the world and international developments in several layers. With the ignite of the "Reform and Opening up", China opened its doors to foreign investment, rapidly expanded foreign trade, began interacting with Western militaries, and also began the initial stages of joining international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Although China's leaders were shocked by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early years of "Reform and Opening up", they quickly established diplomatic relations with the new Russian Federation and the four newly independent former Soviet republics. Relations with Europe also entered to the new phase after 1995. In the late 1990s, Beijing began to participate in various regional multilateral institutions in Asia, and its assistance to Southeast Asia after the 1997 Asian financial crisis helped accelerate this process. Relations with the United States improved in 1997 and 1998, with the exchange of state visits between Presidents Jiang Zemin and Clinton. Overall, China's path during this period saw the country become more integrated into regional and international system.

Aim

This article aims to examine China's foreign policy orientations during Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping's era, and to assess the country's actions and their consequences in the international arena through the lens of revisionism. The chosen question of the article is: What is China's revisionist orientation as a rising power?

Methodology

This research benefits from 'Process Tracing' method which is a tool helps researchers to identify causes of phenomenon.

Results

During the Jiang Zemin presidency, China's proposal of a 'new security concept' indicated a broad understanding of security by leaders based on a kind of interconnectedness and interdependence of international issues in such a way that their resolution would not be possible without international cooperation. Therefore, its resolution also required a degree of institutionalization in the international order to some extent. In general, during the Hu Jintao era and especially in the early period, China's foreign policy was to consolidate the previous position (access). In other words, in the post-Cold War era, China was more in a position to shape a bipolar system (as a pole against U.S.) than any other country. However, during this period, Chinese leaders countered unilateralism and the hegemonic system by proposing initiatives such as 'harmonious world'. While China's main focus during the Jiang

Zemin and Hu Jintao eras was on increasing and maintaining its position in the international system, with the rise of Xi Jinping, the country moved towards enhancing its brokerage position.

Conclusion

As a smart revisionist power, China is neither seeking to destroy the global order (like rogue states) nor is it fully absorbed into the existing order (like status quo states). Rather, by increasing its economic, diplomatic, and institutional influence, it is attempting to replace the US-centered unipolar order with a multipolar, multi-institutional international order. In this regard, this article examines China's revisionist orientation in the context of the three terms of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping (2013-2021). During Jiang Zemin's era, mechanisms leading to strengthening access prevailed. In other words, during this period, China demonstrated by proposing a 'new security concept' that it did not intend to create a circumstance similar to the Cold War and pursue competition between great powers with traditional means such as military-political tools. On the other hand, by becoming a member and actively participating in international regimes related to non-proliferation and trade, such as the NPT or WTO, it consolidated its position of integrated and institutionalized in the international order.

The consequence of focusing on strengthening access was that China, while benefiting from the resources available in the international order and being bound by it, saw any costs arising from fundamental changes and transformations in it as high for itself. The first half of Hu Jintao's presidency focused on maintaining the position of institutionalized power, and 'harmonious world' can be considered a continuation and completion of the 'new security concept'. Now, in this period, when China had reached a degree of institutionalization in the existing order (high access), it took a turn towards strengthening its brokerage position. In other words, while considering China's position as a responsible power, Hu began to balance the relations between these countries and the so-called developing countries, which itself increased China's brokerage position and, consequently, its 'entrepreneurial power'. However, the bulk of China's efforts to strengthen its brokerage position were made with the rise of Xi Jinping. The reason for such efforts can be attributed to systemic pressures imposed to counter the country's rise, such as the 'pivot to Asia' by the United States. Although Xi has tried to maintain China's access into the existing order by pursuing a 'new model of great power relations' from the very first days of his presidency, he has tried to take measures such as the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS Bank, the expansion of partnership diplomacy, and most importantly, the 'Belt and Road Initiative' to strengthen China's entrepreneurial power with the aim of enhancing its brokerage position by exploiting the potential hidden in the sub-system actors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

This article is extracted from the corresponding author's doctoral dissertation entitled *Distinction in the Nature of Revisionism and Its Impact on Iran-China Strategic Relations*.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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