

Facilitative Leadership and China's New Role in the World

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Abstract China is becoming a more influential actor in the world, being a key factor in global climate governance and international development. While the Chinese government is still avoiding the term “international leadership” in its official discourse, China is in practice exercising international leadership and is bound to assume more leadership in the world in coming years. This article explains the reasons behind Chinese reluctance to embrace a leadership discourse, and attempts to develop the concept of facilitative leadership, based on existing Chinese leadership practices, to solve the conceptual problem and to ensure a sustainable and constructive leadership role in world affairs. The key features of a facilitative leadership are collective rather than hegemonic leadership, attractive rather than coercive leadership, win–win rather than solipsistic leadership, and empowering rather than patronal leadership.

Keywords Facilitative leadership · International order · China · Belt and Road Initiative

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1 Introduction

An increasingly challenging world needs more powerful international leadership. However, the supply of international leadership faces crisis. Before Donald Trump was elected the US president, some scholars had already pointed out that “international collective action is affected by serious international leadership deficit” (Pang 2010, 5). Others argued that “when international cooperation and multilateralism is badly needed, countries show up with selfishness, reluctance to cooperate, denial of responsibility, difficulty in establish new institutions and low-efficiency of current institutions” (Shi 2014, 9).

The international leadership deficit, on the one hand, is caused by the undersupply of international leadership. The international community has not provided sufficient solutions to regional security, counterterrorism, economic development, climate change, sustainable development, etc. On the other hand, the international leadership deficit is also caused by the mismatch of international leadership. After the cold war, the US and western powers controlled the supply of international leadership. However, the US and its western allies have brought severe problems due to their over-leadership based on the so-called western liberal order.

The US promoted neo-liberalism and asked for loose regulation, which has resulted in the most severe financial crisis in recent history. The US and its allies started several anti-terrorism wars and humanitarian interventions, which led to the appearance of several failed states and even the Islamic State, as well as the most massive refugee crisis in Europe after WWII. Another problem of US international leadership is that it does not reform the international system according to shifts of international power. Therefore, emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil have not gained their fair share in the provision of international leadership.

Overall, Trump’s winning of the presidential election worsens the situation. A more domestic-focused and egoist US moving from over-intervention to strategic contraction will solve part of the previous problem, by creating less chaos around the world through its ill-designed interventions. However, a Trump administration will shed responsibility which the US shouldered before such as its support for free trade and climate change governance, hence exacerbating the leadership problem in a number of areas of global governance.

In the early 1990s, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping proposed the diplomatic policy “keeping a low profile.” For the following 20 years, Chinese foreign policy generally followed this policy. As Chinese power and influence grows, China is embracing the “diplomacy of a major state”. In September 2016, China hosted the G20 summit in Hangzhou. Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke at the summit and emphasized that “facing a complex and challenging international economy as well as the international community’s expectation on the G20, China hopes to work together with other partners to find a solution to international economic development and make the international economy strong, sustainable, and inclusive.”¹ Xi made another speech to defend globalization, the Paris Agreement

¹ Xi Jinping’s opening speech at the G20 Summit in Hangzhou 2016. Available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-09/04/c_129268987.htm, accessed 1 June 2017.

and the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017. Amitav Acharya commented that Xi "criticized trade protectionism and defend globalization, which shows that China is going to fill in the gap of international leadership left by Trump's administration".²

In the authors' view, whether China should undertake more international responsibility and assume that some leadership role is no longer a question. In fact, China has already shouldered some responsibility as an international leader, being one of key players in cementing the Paris Agreement on climate change, the second contributor to the UN peace-keeping budget, and one of largest development assistance providers to developing countries. After Trump became the US President, the international community has raised its expectation for China's role in international leadership. Therefore, a more important question is how China will lead. This article reviews the literature on international leadership and proposes a new analytical framework. The key argument of this article is that China should adopt a facilitative leadership, a new type of international leadership.

2 Typology of International Leadership

Although great contributions of research on international leadership have been made, Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman argue that the concept of international leadership still lacks a consensus definition (Nye 2008, 21). Oran Young (2001), 1 also argues that "international leadership is a complex phenomenon, ill-defined, poorly understood, and subject to recurrent controversy among students of international affairs". Burns (1979) put the relations between leader and follower at the core of the definition of international leadership. He argues that "Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers. This is done in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and followers" (Burns 1979, 18).

International leadership takes place in an anarchic international system. It is more difficult to exercise leadership in a system, where no formal hierarchy exists. Young (1991), 285 defines international leadership in the context of international institution building. He argues that "leadership refers to those individuals who want to solve or avoid collective action dilemma. The collective action dilemma prevents actors from reaching common ground during the institutional bargain" (Young 1991, 285). In this article of 1991, from a behavioristic and leader-centric perspective, he argues that international leadership can be divided into three categories: *structural leadership* which translates the possession of material resources into bargaining power; *entrepreneur leadership* which solve problems through negotiation skills;

² Acharya, Amitav. "Emerging powers can be saviours of the global liberal order," Financial Times. 2017. Available online at <https://www.ft.com/content/f175b378-dd79-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6>, accessed 1 June 2017.

and *intellectual leadership* which relies on influencing other actors' perspectives through the production of intellectual capital or generative systems of thought.

Young's discussion on international leadership is limited to international institution building; hence, it does not offer a comprehensive definition of international leadership. Ikenberry (1996, 388) argues that leadership has two essential elements, power and purpose, and could be defined as "the use of power to orchestrate the actions of a group toward a collective end". Ikenberry (1996) also proposes three kinds of international leadership: structural leadership, institutional leadership, and situational leadership. Structural leadership refers to the "underlying distribution of material capabilities that gives some states the ability to direct the overall shape of world political order" (Ikenberry 1996, 389). Institutional leadership means "the rules and practices that states agree to that set in place principles and procedures that guide their relations" (Ikenberry 1996, 391). Situational leadership refers to "actions and initiatives of states that induce cooperation quite apart from the distribution of power or the array of institutions (Ikenberry 1996, 395). For Ikenberry, due to the relatively decay of American power, he specifically emphasizes the importance of international institutions led by the US and its ability in maintaining the leadership of the US and the western world. In other words, although the structural leadership on which the American power was based has declined, America's institutional leadership remains.

Nye (2008) discusses the relations among power, domestic leadership, and international leadership in his book *The Powers to Lead*. He argues that leadership is the power "to orient and mobilize others for a purpose" (Nye 2008, 19). Power and leadership are strongly connected. Without power, one cannot lead. However, Nye's definition of leadership does not equal to others' structural leadership. Since Nye divides power into hard power and soft power, he thinks that leadership can come from both hard and soft power. Hard power echoes structural leadership, while soft power echoes entrepreneur leadership, institutional leadership, or intellectual leadership discussed by other scholars. Nye (2008, 53–68) also points out the difference between transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders "induce followers to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the higher purposes of the group that provides the context of the relationship (Nye 2008, 62). It relies on the followers' high expectation and moral principle rather than their fear, greed, or hate. Transactional leadership relies on hard power. They "motivate followers by appealing to their self-interest" (Nye 2008, 62).

International leaders can practice leadership in different areas. Johnson (1905), 27 proposes economic leadership, political leadership, and educational leadership when discussing post-WWI international leadership. In different areas, international leadership has different institutions and procedures. For example, Grubb and Gupta (2000) argue that to explain the leadership of the European Union in the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, one needs to understand three categories of leadership, *structural leadership*, *instrumental leadership*, and *directional leadership*. Structural leadership was borrowed from other scholars. However, in global governance on climate change, power is derived not only from a country's political and economic capacity but also from its size of carbon emissions. Instrumental leadership requires leaders to understand different countries' long-term interests and

“craft structures and apply diplomatic skills to create ‘winning’ coalitions” (Grubb and Gupta 2000, 23). Directional leadership refers to the “use of ideas and domestic implementation to influence the perception of other countries as to what is desirable and possible” (Grubb and Gupta 2000, 23). The climate change issue needs all countries to change their ways of consuming energy and lifestyles; therefore, directional leadership is the key to ensure support from others.

Alongside the decay of American power, some scholars started to discuss plural collective leadership. Keohane (2005) discussed hegemonic leadership’s role in the construction of international institutions in the past. He argues that in the post-hegemonic era, cooperation is possible due to the continuation of the previous institutions (Keohane 2005, 20). He does not explicitly specify that post-hegemonic cooperation presents a new kind of plural leadership. Snidal (1985), from a rationalist perspective argues that two or more countries are possible to gain enough net interest in producing international public goods. Padoan (2007) points out that effective global governance in the post-hegemonic era can be provided by several leaders. He argues that based on historical experience and relevant theories, plural leadership needs to fulfill some requirements to have effective governance and motivate collective action positively: countries must (1) have a long-time horizon and (2) be prepared to adjust to the international environment to reach agreement. Some scholars regard the G20 summit as a plural international leadership institution. They argue that the G20 should provide six kinds of leadership effectively: strategic leadership, political leadership, integrative leadership, institutional reform leadership, pragmatic leadership, and inclusive leadership (Brandford and Lim 2011).

Research on international leadership in China has only appeared in recent years. Yet, many Chinese scholars have raised valuable points based on Chinese history and contemporary practices. Based on ancient Chinese political thought, Yan (2011, 8) divides leadership into three categories: *Qiangquan* (tyrant) leadership, *Baquan* (hegemonic) leadership, and *Wangquan* (kingly) leadership, and argues that “Qiangquan follows power norms, Wangquan follows moral norms and Baquan follows both power and moral norms.” Pang (2010, 8) argues that international leadership is different from hegemony. International leadership means the organizing, shaping, and directing of inter-state relations. Those countries, who can enable the international system to follow the course that they design, propose or drive are leaders. Li (2010, 57) argues that international leadership is not to control others in international affairs. Rather, it is the ability to take responsibility, promote cooperation, pursue win–win relations, and attract followers. Yang and Huang (2014, 87) argue that international leadership is the way that a country can promote its ideology to become a common goal for international society. Promoting ideology, providing a common goal, having good behavior, and building an international reputation are the four elements for a country to be an international leader.

3 A new Framework for Analyzing International Leadership

To have a clearer definition of international leadership, this article defines international leadership as the practice and ability of international actor(s) to foster the realization of specific shared goals in international society, through the exercise of its influence and with the support from other actors. Based on this definition, this article argues that one can understand international leadership from the number of international leaders, leadership purpose, leadership method, leadership style, leadership domain, leadership performance, and the legitimacy of leadership (see Table 1).

3.1 Number of Leaders

International leadership can be held by one actor or several actors collectively. After the end of the Cold War, as the sole superpower, the United States has been making every effort to ensure an American-led liberal international order. American Primacy and sole leadership have been the central priority of American foreign strategy. However, a unipolar system is an exception within the world order. As other countries develop, the international structure has to be de-centralized or

Table 1 Models of International Leadership Summarized by the authors

Indicators	Categories	Sub-categories
Number of leaders	Unilateral leadership	
	Cooperative leadership	Concerted Complementary Parallel Competitive
Purpose	Solipsistic leadership Win-win leadership	
Method	Attractive leadership	Benefit giving Solution providing Institutional Ideational
	Coercive leadership	Military coercive Economic coercive Normative coercive
Style	Patronal leadership Empowering leadership	
Domain	Thematic leadership	Security Economy Environment
Performance	Regional leadership	
	High, medium, low	
Legitimacy	High, medium, low	

multipolarized. Even when the US was at its zenith of power, it could not always command other countries according to its will. As the international system is moving from a unipolar structure towards a multipolar one, unilateral international leadership has to be replaced by plural leadership. In other words, for the major powers in today's world, the only way to cope with common challenges is to lead with others.

Four kinds of plural international leadership could be imagined. First, concerted international leadership emphasizes institutionalized cooperative leadership, such as a concert of major powers in the G20 and other international institutions. Second, complementary international leadership allows leading actors to practice leadership in different issue areas or different policy aspects within a specific issue area. Third, parallel international leadership allows leading actors to take leadership responsibility in different regions in parallel (see Chen 2016). Fourth, race-to-the-top competitive leadership allows leaders to compete in a positive way to promote more supply of international public goods.

3.2 Purpose

International leadership is to realize a specific goal. Many definitional differences about international leadership usually come from different (mis)understandings of the leadership purpose. The key question here is how this purpose is defined. In the past, leading countries usually shaped the common purpose of international society according to their own preferences and interests. However, if such a purpose does not match other countries' interests, this kind of international leadership cannot solve the world's problems, and very often exacerbates existing problems or even creates more problems. Therefore, this article tries to differentiate two kinds of the purpose of international leadership: solipsistic international leadership and win–win international leadership. The former emphasizes self-interest in purpose setting, tries to define common goals by its own experience, values, and interests, while the later focuses on collective definition of the purpose of collective actions among states based on their shared experience, values, and interests.³ Under a win–win leadership, leading actors would also use activities to influence the redefinition of perceptions and interests of other countries, to ensure wider and deeper international cooperation. However, in so doing, win–win leadership would mainly rely on the appeal of its experiences, values, and norms, and the willing choice of other countries. In contrast, a solipsistic leader often uses coercion to impose its will onto others.

3.3 Method

International leadership is about the use of influence. Influence can be categorized into two parts, attraction and coercion (see Chang and Chen 2014; Chen and Chang

³ A scholar from Rand Corporation points out that the liberal international order proposed by the US is not that liberal. From the perspective of other countries, the US uses norms selectively. The US only uses these norms when the norms are in favour of the US and set according to the US interest. See Mazarr (2017).

2012). International leadership can also be divided into attractive international leadership and coercive international leadership. When the US uses the power of attraction to influence, it is more popular as a leader. The opening of a vast domestic market to its trade partners has long been a key of its attractiveness and influence in the world. On the contrary, when the US uses military and economic coercive methods, its reputation, and legitimacy of leadership decline. The two methods do not need to be mutually exclusive, which means that states could combine the use of the power of attraction and the power of coercion. However, if a leading country uses more coercive power, its leadership could be more questioned and less sustainable.

3.4 Style

An important element in international leadership is the relationship between leaders and followers. In a hierarchical domestic political system, a leader–follower relationship is normal. However, in the international system, where all countries are equal legally, this leader–follower dichotomy becomes very controversial. The reason that the Chinese government has been hesitant in embracing the concept of “international leadership”, in the authors’ view, is to an important extent due to the hierarchical nature of this dichotomy. Historically, international leadership mostly is built in such a hierarchical fashion, with a purpose to exercise domination in the name of leadership. However, in a sovereign-state international system, real international leadership should be based on international law which defines that all sovereign states are equal. Countries should regard others as partners rather than followers. For a true leader, other countries should be equal partners to achieve a common goal.

Another issue that should be taken into consideration is how much responsibility and cost the leader should take. International leadership can be one country taking all the responsibility and cost, which is a hierarchical patronal leadership.⁴ It can also be the leader outsourcing responsibility and cost to followers, which leads to a hierarchical subcontracting leadership.⁵ Another style of international leadership is the leader forcing followers to take most of the responsibilities and costs, while the leader attempts to attain its leadership position without undertaking its due responsibilities. In a way, the current Trump administration is moving towards this kind of international leadership style. There is another leadership style, a non-hierarchical empowering leadership, which the authors would argue as a better alternative. An empowering leader needs to take as much as responsibility and cost according to its capacity, but mainly through enhancing the capacities of other international actors in their efforts to tackle the domestic and international challenges, and doing so in a mutually respectful way.

⁴ Some other scholars have raised similar conceptions: patronal leadership which refers to leading country to make sure one or several followers can have net interest. See Knorr (1973).

⁵ At the end of 2011, *New Yorker* magazine used the comment by an anonymous consultant for president Obama saying “leading from behind” to describe his Libya strategy, which is to encourage European allies to intervene. From our perspective, this is a kind of subcontracting or outsourcing leadership. See Schake (2017).

3.5 Domain

International leadership is needed in every specific domain. With respect to policy domains, international leadership includes leadership in security, economy, development, climate change, etc. From a geographical perspective, international leadership can be Asian leadership, European leadership, or African leadership.

3.6 Performance

The evaluation of international leadership should be based on whether it has achieved the purpose previously defined. Only when achieving its purpose can international leadership be seen as effective. In an ever challenging world, people expect international leadership to face these challenges. The leader should find the best way to improve leadership effectiveness. The ideal type of international leadership is to fix the problem and realize sustainable development. Before a more comprehensive evaluation system appears, the performance is evaluated as high, medium, and low in this paper.

3.7 Legitimacy

Whether the leader is recognized by other members of the international society is a key question in the legitimacy of international leadership. High-level recognition can entail voluntary and strong support from other actors, resulting in higher effectiveness. Low-level recognition can lead to less cooperation from other actors, which would limit the leader's ability to lead. To have legitimacy, leader must incorporate followers' interests and aspirations when setting the purpose of leadership, adopt mainly an attractive leadership method and a non-hierarchical style.

4 Facilitative Leadership and China

Facing a leadership deficit situation, countries other than the US should make more contribution to international leadership. The US-led international order was supported mainly by its allies in the west especially the EU member states. However, the EU is facing challenges including geopolitical conflict with Russia, terrorism, the refugee crisis, Brexit, populism, economic recovery, and the sovereign debt crisis. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, admitted that the EU is facing its three biggest challenges since the Treaty of Rome: (1) geopolitical threat from the outside; (2) anti-EU, anti-migration, and anti-refugee sentiment in member states; and (3) loss of confidence in the EU among European elites.⁶ Mainstream candidates have won the Dutch and French elections, which is a

⁶ "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," European Council: letter by President Donald Tusk to the 27 EU heads of state or government on the future of the EU before the Malta summit, January 31, 2017. Available online at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31-tusk-letter-future-europe/>, accessed 1 June 2017.

positive signal for the stabilization of the EU, and in ensuring European countries and the EU could still be important leading actors in global governance.

The emerging powers have also had difficulties in economic development in recent years, but key countries among them, such as China and India, are still moving forward steadily. These countries have kept complaining that they did not enjoy proper status in the US-led international order. Nowadays, since the US is losing interest in international affairs, the emerging powers should take more responsibilities, not only for their own interests but also for the common interest of the international community.

After the end of the Cold War, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that China should be modest and sensitive and “do not be the leader.” At that time, China’s GDP was less than 2% of world GDP. However, after 20 years, China’s GDP is the second largest in the world and accounts for 15% of world GDP. China has also become the country with largest foreign exchange reserves, international trade, greenhouse gas emissions, and one of the top three in foreign direct investment. In addition, China also enjoys permanent member status in the UN Security Council. Obviously, if China does not take its due responsibility in international leadership, it is a waste of opportunity and evasion of its responsibility as a major power.

Therefore, the question for China should be how to define and play its international leadership role, rather than whether it should have a leadership role. China was the leader in East Asia for a long time in history and developed the tributary system, which is a kind of hierarchical leadership. After WWII, the US has established a global hegemonic leadership, while the EU as a union of 28 states proposed “normative power” in global normative leadership. Today, it is impossible to restore the Chinese tributary system. It is also difficult for China to duplicate the US global hegemonic leadership. Since China is a supporter for pluralism and insists on national sovereignty principle, it has no intention to set the norms and standards for the world, not mentioning the EU’s normative power is shrinking due to its domestic crises and Brexit. Therefore, there is no leadership model from history for China to learn about how to take international leadership.

This article argues that China needs a new model of international leadership. This new model should provide direction for China’s involvement in the supply of international leadership. It should enable China to fulfill its capacity in international leadership and, at the same time, to avoid misunderstandings such as leadership equals domination, leadership equals selfishness, leadership equals coercion, and leadership equals patronage. Some scholars have made contributions in this field. Kejin (2012) defines China’s “constructive leadership” in its three foreign policy shifts. This leadership model can be summarized as that China creates an international environment in favor of its own peaceful development to maintain its development trend, to protect its overseas interest, and to promote its international reputation and capability. Kirton (2016, 131–134) reviews the history of the G20 and its annual conferences and argues that China’s leadership can be depicted in three words: sensitive, accumulated and cooperative.

This article proposes a facilitative international leadership role for China.⁷ Facilitative international leadership means that China uses its substantial influence to advance the shared goals of the members of international society and to achieve joint development and progress, in a cooperative, win–win, attractive, and empowering manner.

Facilitative international leadership emphasizes that key actors should lead collectively in a cooperative way. In the past, there were cases when one country led a country bloc. For example, during the Cold War, the two superpowers had dominance in their blocs, respectively. After the end of the Cold War, the US and its allies regarded the world as a unipolar system and could pursue a US-centric international leadership. However, US international leadership is losing its power base in politics and economy as well as its legitimacy. The world needs cooperative leadership. The G20 is a new institution that contrasts to unilateral leadership. Facilitative leadership demands plural leaders and tries to have collective leadership. With the rise of the emerging countries, the international system is becoming multipolarized or de-centered to such an extent that any attempt to restore unilateral leadership will be dampened, and stronger collective leadership will be demanded to address the risks and challenges in this transitional period. As a signatory state of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), China has made substantial contributions to nuclear non-proliferation and to dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue along with other major powers such as the US, Russia and Germany (Pang 2012, 210). In global economic governance, faced with economic stagnation, rising protectionism, and a wider gap between rich and poor, China has promoted inclusive development through the G20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016.

Facilitative leadership is win–win leadership to promote common goals of the international community. In the past, international leadership usually served the leader's own national interest, especially its pursuit of power. Even when a country tries to get recognition as leader by providing international public goods, this leadership is still a solipsistic leadership if the country's purpose is to establish its powerful status. This kind of solipsistic leadership's sustainability and legitimacy remain uncertain. Unlike solipsistic leadership, win–win leadership is more sustainable and legitimate, which can assist other countries' development. Chinese President Xi Jinping said at his speech when he visited the Parliament of Mongolia in 2014 that “you can take a ride on our express train or just make a hitchhike, all are welcome” and “we will never do things that could result in ‘one wins and the other loses’ or ‘one wins more and the other gets less’. We will take into consideration the other side's interests in some specific projects”.⁸ Under the facilitative leadership, the establishment of a leader is based on the promotion of the win–win development of the leading country and all other countries. In an ideal situation, the leader will also update international norms and each and every country's interest. For example, the ideas of “a community of common destiny” and

⁷ Chen Zhimin has proposed the idea of “facilitative power” in a previous article. See Chen (2012).

⁸ President Xi welcomes Mongolia to ‘board China's fast train of development,’ China Daily. Available online at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014xivisitmongolia/2014-08/22/content_18470079.htm, accessed 22 August 2017.

“inclusive growth” proposed by China focus on a higher level of cooperation to achieve win–win development.

Facilitative leadership mainly uses attraction to influence and lead. Economic attraction constitutes the main source of China’s global attraction. China can use its enormous domestic market to provide opportunities for others’ exports and investment via mutually beneficial cooperation. It can also use China’s capital and technology to help others develop and, at the same time, promote its own development. Based on this idea, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been welcomed by more and more countries, which shows China’s economic attractive leadership. China should also pay attention to its institutional leadership. In the past few years, China has helped to establish the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, both of them having their headquarters in China. It has played a key role in the Paris agreement on climate change and the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. China has sent most military personnel to UN peacekeeping as a permanent member of UN Security Council, and is the third largest financial contributor to the UN regular budget and the second largest donor to the UN peace-keeping budget. Being actively involved in these institutions can strengthen China’s institutional leadership in international affairs. In addition, China should be an important leader in providing solutions. In the G20 China Summit and International Economic Forum in Davos, China has demonstrated that it could and does want to assume that role.

As for leadership style, China should be an empowering leader, not a hierarchical patronal leader. A hierarchical patronal leader not only establishes new common goals for the others, but also believes that they have the solutions to all problems. In the post-Cold War period, western countries claimed that domestic problems could be easily solved by adopting the western economic and political system. When such a system is not working, western countries propose global governance to replace national governance. In the 21st century, western interventions have brought chaos to a number of developing countries. The results prove that a hierarchical patronal leadership cannot really solve the problems. China should be an empowering leader and recognize the differences among countries. A foreign country cannot impose its solutions onto other countries, and should respect the primary role of other countries in managing their own problems. Therefore, an empowering leader respects others’ sovereignty, supports capability building in other countries and helps other countries to develop problem-solving solutions of their own. Through empowering and providing support, such a facilitative leadership will be much easier for others to accept.

Facilitative international leadership needs legitimacy to ensure its effectiveness. A legitimate leader should have more or less voluntary endorsement from others. A country that aspires to lead will lose legitimacy if it only forces others to follow, since this kind of followership is forced, and does not represent a willing choice. Once the coercion is weakened, the coercive leadership can neither sustain nor achieve its goals.

5 Belt and Road Initiative and China's International Leadership

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's proposal to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st century Maritime Silk Road in cooperation with related countries. It was unveiled by Chinese president Xi Jinping during his visits to Central and Southeast Asia in September and October 2013. The proposed economic belt is considered the longest overland economic corridor in the world connecting the Asia–Pacific region in the east with developed European economies in the west. The 21st century Maritime Silk Road links China to the maritime Asia, Europe, Northeast Africa, and Oceania. According to official documents, the BRI focuses on promoting policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties through extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, with the goal of bringing benefits to all.⁹

Along with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRI is regarded as one of the major foreign policy initiatives by the new Chinese President and has been discussed globally. Although the detailed plan of BRI is still unfolding, by the end of 2016 over 100 countries and international and regional organizations had expressed an interest in participating, and more than 40 of them had signed cooperation agreements with China.¹⁰ There is no doubt that the BRI has become the priority of Chinese foreign policy and will maintain this status over the next 5 years at least.

Based on our analytical framework, in promoting the BRI, China has acquired key features of a facilitative leader. First, it is a cooperative leadership, not a unilateral one. Through the BRI, China has put forward a call for joint development in the vast Eurasian continent and its adjacent regions and is willing to support the participation of relevant countries in this joint endeavor. First, China's BRI needs to be realized with the willing cooperation and participation from other countries along the two silk roads. In the Joint Communiqué of the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, the leaders agreed that there are five cooperation principles: (1) consultation on an equal footing; (2) mutual benefit; (3) harmony and inclusiveness; (4) market-based operation; and (5) balance and sustainability.¹¹ Second, it is a win–win leadership regarding the purpose. Promoting BRI certainly could help the development of western China and economic restructuring at home, but it also provide new resources and opportunities for other countries to achieve joint development through cooperation in the BRI. Third, advancing the BRI mainly relies on China's attractive economic power, such as donations, concessional loans, investments and open access to the Chinese market, as well as the attractive ideas of economic development generated in China, such as a core focus on infrastructure

⁹ “Backgrounder: Keywords on Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua. Available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/06/c_136261504.htm, accessed 31 May 2017.

¹⁰ “Backgrounder: Keywords on Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua. Available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/06/c_136261504.htm, accessed 31 May 2017.

¹¹ “Full text: Joint communiqué of leaders roundtable of Belt and Road forum.” Xinhua. Available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c_136286378.htm, accessed 31 May 2017.

building and connectivity. These material and ideational attractions have secured the participation in the BRI of many countries in the world. Fourth, it is an empowering leadership. China encourages all actors to be motivated in BRI projects and each of them has the opportunity and freedom to decide what kind of development and project they want. The BRI's central guideline is to coordinate with national development strategies between China and participating countries, so that other countries' participation in BRI could enhance their capacity to achieve domestic development. Fifth, it is a limited thematic leadership. The BRI covers the Asia–Pacific to Western Europe, with the priority on connectivity, especially on infrastructure development. It is an initiative mostly in the areas of economic cooperation and people-to-people exchange, without a direct emphasis on security cooperation.

There are three challenges for the BRI and China's new role as a kind of facilitative leader. The first is the performance challenge of the BRI. Although it is too early to evaluate the performance of the BRI, one can easily raise questions regarding the implementation of BRI projects. As mentioned in the third section, international leadership is about providing solutions to the various problems around the world and realizing sustainable development. Therefore, whether the projects of BRI can be sustainable and contribute to problem-solving should be put to a performance test. Up to now, there are a growing number of ongoing projects. Among them, we could also find some that are facing difficulties in implementation. China signed a memorandum of understanding with Serbia and Hungary in 2013 to jointly build and update the railway between Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, and Budapest, the Hungarian capital.¹² The train link will cut travel time from 8 h to three and was expected to finish construction in 2018. Connectivity is one of the priorities of the BRI. Through high-speed railway projects like this, China can help countries to better connect with each other and China resulting in faster and easier exchange of goods and people. Yet, this flagship project was investigated by the EU in February 2017. According to the EU, the investigation “was assessing the financial viability of the 2.89 billion US dollars railway and looking into whether it had violated European Union laws stipulating that public tenders must be offered for large transport projects”.¹³ As China moves into a wider world, China needs to be aware of the various legal and other hurdles in project implementation and to ensure better coordination with key actors involved in BRI.

The second is the legitimacy challenge of the BRI. Since the BRI is a relatively new initiative from China, some countries may not be ready to endorse the BRI or some aspects of the BRI at present. Some scholars argue that BRI is a threat to some regions and are very critical towards its implementation (Holsag 2017). Clarke (2016) has also raised concerns about BRI's influence on regional security especially in Afghanistan. At the May 2017 BRI summit in Beijing, India did not attend the event and some EU member states refused to sign one BRI Summit

¹² “China agrees railway deals with Hungary, Serbia,” Xinhua,. Available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/24/c_134850726.htm, accessed 1 June 2017.

¹³ “EU sets collision course with China over “Silk Road” rail project,” Financial Times. Available online at, <https://www.ft.com/content/003bad14-f52f-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608>, accessed 1 June 2017.

document on trade, because “it did not include commitments to social and environmental sustainability and transparency”.¹⁴ Clearly, there is still much work to be done to raise the level of acceptance in countries along the silk roads. However, many other scholars hold a more optimistic perspective (Ferdinand 2016; Summers 2016; Yu 2017). Based on the number of countries signing agreements with China on BRI and joining the AIIB, the initiative is now widely recognized and supported already. If China could demonstrate the benefits of this initiative to the world through its successful implementation of the planned projects, it is very possible that the BRI could attract more countries to join. The presence of the delegations from Japan and the United States attending the Beijing BRI summit shows that even these two countries are warming up to the BRI.

The third challenge is domestic understanding and consensus on the BRI within China. Since the BRI is arguably the largest initiative of Chinese foreign policy in this century, China’s role in the BRI is still under heated discussion. For example, Xi Jinping pointed out that “the BRI is not a solo by China but a chorus of all countries along the Belt and Road.” Soon after the speech, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce issued the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road*.¹⁵ However, there are different interpretations of Xi’s speech. Some ministries, media, and experts argue that China and other countries are all members of the chorus,¹⁶ while others try to portray President Xi as the conductor of the chorus.¹⁷ It is never easy to form consensus domestically. Chinese official speeches and documents are avoiding using “leadership” to describe China’s role in the BRI, but some societal voices are already keen to grasp China’s moment of re-assuming international authority.

Despite all these challenges, China is following the pathway towards a facilitative leadership. As Zhao Kejin (2016, 539–564) points out, the “rise in China’s power does not bring an underlying motive for structural change”; rather, “China’s success depends more on China’s foreign strategy.” Therefore, the future of China’s emerging facilitative leadership is very much dependent on the success of the BRI. If the BRI can have high performance and legitimacy, China could make a major contribution to narrow the international leadership deficit, making itself one of the international leaders at the same time. In addition, of course, China will be a different kind of leader from the US, since in its foreign relations, China prefers to “employ a combination of various means to achieve good and stable *Guanxi* with

¹⁴ “EU backs away from trade statement in blow to China’s “modern Silk Road” plan,” The Guardian. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/15/eu-china-summit-beijing-xi-jinping-belt-and-road>, accessed 1 June 2017.

¹⁵ National Development and Reform Commission, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road* (First Edition), March 2015. Available online at http://xbkfs.ndrc.gov.cn/qyzc/201503/t20150330_669366.html, accessed 7 June 2017.

¹⁶ “Ministry of Commerce: One Belt and One Road is a chorus of China and other countries,” China News, Available online at <http://www.chinanews.com/cj/2015/07-29/7434735.shtml>, accessed 7 June 2017.

¹⁷ “Xi Jinping conducting One Belt One Road chorus,” CCTV. Available online at <http://news.cctv.com/2017/05/07/ARTIRiCeQTx042BaCX3IiQx170507.shtml>, accessed 7 June 2017.

other countries without defining any of them or being defined by any of them, as an enemy” (Pan 2016, 319). A facilitative leadership that is concerted, win–win, attractive, empowering and thematic is not only ideal for China’s new role in the world but also beneficial for all other actors.

6 Conclusions

The new type of international leadership, facilitative leadership, which we propose in this article, is not the only choice for China. China, of course, can follow the path of the US and pursue a unilateral, solipsistic, and coercive leadership. However, through this kind of traditional leadership, it is extremely difficult for China to realize its ambition to be a true international leader. China needs to articulate a new type of international leadership, and as we argue in this article, a facilitative leadership is the most proper type for China in the near future.

During the Munich Security Conference 2017, the host published the Munich Security Report 2017: *Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order*, in which it expressed deep concern regarding the maintenance of the western international order.¹⁸ The US-led western world has held the international leadership for a long time since the end of Cold War. This leadership is in crisis both domestically and internationally. China has many complaints with the western leadership. However, this should not be a reason for China to just stay as an outsider. Nevertheless, there are valuable components in the existing international order such as an open international economy, climate change governance, UN peacekeeping, and the sustainable development agenda. China and most other countries participated in the establishment of these institutions, which serve the common interests of all. When there is a leadership deficit, China should naturally take on more responsibilities. In this process, China should learn from the mistakes of the US and western countries in the past and not to pursue unilateral, egoist, coercive, or monopolized international leadership. Rather, China needs to embrace a more enlightened type of international leadership, a facilitative international leadership that is collective, win–win, attractive, and empowering.

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¹⁸ Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Report 2017: *Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order* February 2017. Available online at <https://www.securityconference.de/en/discussion/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2017/>, accessed 1 June 2017.

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