

The China-USA Relationship: A Shift and a New Paradigm

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Abstract

*This paper analyses the discursive and strategic re-framing of the China-United States relationship that was formally crystallised at the Beijing summit of 14 May 2026. It argues that the Chinese formula of **constructive strategic stability** and the **Four Stabilities** displaces the American framing of **strategic competition** that has structured the relationship since the 2017 National Security Strategy. The paper reads the new positioning together with President XI Jinping's red-line warning on Taiwan, the Four Global Initiatives, and the modest three-day character of President TRUMP's state visit, in order to argue that what is on display is not rhetoric alone but the consolidation of an alternative paradigm of major-power relations. The paper proceeds by outlining the new paradigm and its philosophical anchors; reconstructing the Westphalian principles of peaceful coexistence that China is recentring rather than overturning; tracing the United States-led erosion of these principles through the WOLFOWITZ Doctrine, the bombing of Yugoslavia, and the legality-legitimacy manipulation at the United Nations — a revisionist trajectory that culminates in the impunity associated with the TRUMP and NETANYAHU governments; offering a genealogy of the American characterisation of China from NIXON to May 2026; showing the internal coherence of the Four Initiatives and the new China-US paradigm; and demonstrating that the Chinese formula of win-win cooperation is grounded in a long-standing worldview articulated through Marxism with Chinese characteristics. The paper concludes that the symbolic restraint of the TRUMP visit confirms an incrementally consolidated new balance of power.*

1. Introduction: The New Positioning and Its Significance

The Beijing summit of 14 May 2026 between President XI Jinping and President Donald TRUMP produced what the *Global Times* described as a “new vision of building a constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability as a ‘new positioning’ in bilateral relations” (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 1). The formulation is significant precisely because it is not a slogan. It is a deliberate, considered re-characterisation of the most consequential bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century, advanced by the rising power and accepted, in the framing of the joint readouts, by the established one.

Read against the dominant American discursive frame of the past nine years — **strategic competition** between a “revisionist power” and the established “liberal international order” (White House, 2017, p. 25) — the Chinese formulation displaces a vocabulary that had structured American policy under the first TRUMP administration, the BIDEN interregnum and the early months of the second TRUMP term. The displacement is discursive, but its consequences are structural. Concepts in international politics organise expectations, distribute moral responsibility, and channel policy: they are not free-floating descriptors.

President XI articulated the new paradigm through the formula of the **Four Stabilities**:

- positive stability with cooperation as the mainstay;
- healthy stability with competition within proper limits;
- constant stability with manageable differences; and
- lasting stability with expectable peace (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 2).

This is the discursive scaffolding of a long-term paradigm, not a tactical accommodation. The *Global Times* is explicit on the point: the Four Stabilities “paint a clear and feasible blueprint” that is “not a stopgap measure, but a long-term approach” (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 2). The accompanying triad of three questions posed by XI to TRUMP — whether the two countries can overcome the Thucydides Trap, meet global challenges together, and build a future for the well-being of the two peoples — frames the relationship around generative cooperation rather than zero-sum competition (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 2).

The reference is direct: Graham ALLISON's *Destined for War* (2017) had popularised the Thucydides Trap thesis — that twelve of sixteen historical cases of a rising power challenging an established one have ended in war — as the lens through which Washington should anticipate the rise of China (Allison, 2017, p. xv). The Chinese rejoinder, articulated in the voice of Xi himself, is that the trap is not historical destiny but a “new paradigm of major-country relations” yet to be built (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 2).

1.1 The Taiwan red line and the warning of confrontation

The new positioning was not announced in the absence of friction. In the closed-door portion of the bilateral meeting, President Xi delivered a sharp and unambiguous warning concerning Taiwan. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry readout, repeated by global news agencies:

"The Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-US relations. If it is handled properly, the bilateral relationship will enjoy overall stability. Otherwise, the two countries will have clashes and even conflicts, putting the entire relationship in great jeopardy" (Mao Ning, cited in Al Jazeera, 2026).

This is, in the established vocabulary of Chinese diplomacy, an articulation of the principle of **red lines** — and of *mutual respect for each other's red lines* — on which the entire edifice of **constructive strategic stability** rests. Xi has been consistent on this since at least the Lima APEC summit of November 2024, when he warned President BIDEN that support for Taiwan independence constituted “the first red line that must not be crossed in China-US relations” (cited in TASS, 2024). The continuity from Lima to Beijing is doctrinal, not rhetorical.

The strategic underpinning of this warning has shifted. Chinese analysts have indicated, with growing confidence since 2025, that the People's Liberation Army is now positioned to defeat a United States-NATO coalition decisively in a maritime contingency on the Chinese periphery. This shift in the underlying military balance, combined with the reversal of the American strategic position in the Iran confrontation, gives the red-line language in Beijing a credibility that earlier articulations did not possess. The *Global Times* frame of “manageable differences”

must therefore be read alongside the Taiwan warning: cooperation is offered, but on the basis of a balance of power that Beijing now considers settled.

2. The Westphalian Principles of Peaceful Coexistence

The Chinese characterisation of the bilateral relationship as one of **constructive strategic stability** and **peaceful coexistence** is not an invention of 2026. It is a deliberate recovery, and re-interpretation, of the principles associated with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. The continuity must be argued carefully, because the Westphalian tradition itself has been the subject of vigorous scholarly contest.

Andreas OSIANDER's landmark revisionist article (2001) is the necessary starting point. OSIANDER demonstrates that the Peace of Westphalia, which terminated the Thirty Years' War, did not **create** the sovereign-state system in the simple formulation passed down by twentieth-century International Relations textbooks. The treaties of Münster and Osnabrück did not “confirm ... sovereignty as a principle” (Osiander, 2001, p. 267); the actors involved already took their independence for granted. What the treaties did do was institutionalise a particular set of coexistence principles — confessional pluralism, mutual guarantee, peaceful settlement of disputes — within a Central European security order (Croxtton, 2013).

Subsequent scholarship has refined and partly rehabilitated the conventional reading. Benno TESCHKE's *The Myth of 1648* (2003) challenges the equation of 1648 with the birth of modern international order on materialist grounds. Daniel PHILPOTT's *Revolutions in Sovereignty* (2001) traces the longer ideational arc through which Westphalia became associated with sovereignty. Randall LESAFFER's edited collection (2004) situates the treaties within the wider evolution of European peace-treaty practice. A recent reassessment by MUESER (2024) reopens the question through the lens of territorial rights and imperial hierarchy. Whichever interpretive line one adopts, a core of coexistence principles can be reconstructed from the treaty texts and their reception:

- territorial authority and the equality of sovereigns;
- non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states;

- confessional and ideological pluralism, originally between Catholic and Protestant powers;
- balance of power as a regulatory mechanism;
- mutual guarantee of the settlement; and
- peaceful settlement of disputes (Bring, 2000; Lesaffer, 2004).

It is precisely this cluster — sovereign equality, non-intervention, peaceful settlement, balance of power, mutual guarantee — that re-emerges as the conceptual substrate of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence formulated in the Sino-Indian and Sino-Burmese agreements of 1954 and incorporated into the Bandung Declaration of 1955. The recovery is not accidental. For the post-colonial world, the Westphalian repertoire offered the conceptual instruments through which formerly colonised states could resist great-power tutelage. The Chinese contemporary practice can therefore be read as the re-interpretation of these principles for the New Era — not as a revisionist project but as a stabilising one, in which Beijing positions itself as the custodian of a system that the unipolar moment in Washington had attempted to dismantle.

2.1 Coexistence against hegemony: the MACRON-YOUSSOUF episode at the African Union

The principles of peaceful coexistence stand in direct opposition to the operating logic of a hegemonic system. The Westphalian and Bandung repertoire presupposes *sovereign equality* — every state speaks for itself, and no state speaks for another. The hegemonic system, by contrast, organises representation upwards: the metropolitan power articulates the interests of the periphery and mediates its presence in the principal multilateral forums. The difference is not stylistic. It is the structural difference between a system in which Africa speaks in its own voice and a system in which it is spoken for.

A striking contemporary illustration of the latter was on display at the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa on 13 May 2026, during the discussions on African economic reform and G7 representation ahead of the June 2026 G7 summit. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Mahmoud Ali YOUSSOUF, the

former foreign minister of Djibouti, addressed President Emmanuel MACRON in terms that captured, with unusual clarity, the dynamic at stake:

*"You will be our voice at the G7" (YOUSSOUF, 13 May 2026,
African Union Headquarters, Addis Ababa).*

*"You speak the language of Africans" (YOUSSOUF, 13 May 2026,
African Union Headquarters, Addis Ababa).*

The two formulations articulate, in the voice of the Chairperson of the AU Commission, an explicit acceptance of French representation of African interests in the G7 — the principal forum of the established Western economic powers from which African states are themselves excluded. The implication is direct: African priorities ahead of the G7 summit are to be communicated *through* the French President, who is positioned as the carrier of the African voice and the speaker of the African language. This is the operating grammar of hegemony, not of coexistence. It is the inverse of the principle, central to the Bandung tradition and to the Chinese articulation of the new paradigm, that states represent themselves and that multilateral institutions exist to convene that self-representation rather than to substitute for it.

The episode is not an aberration. It is the predictable outcome of a French repositioning on the African continent and its Eastern Indian Ocean rim, analysed in earlier work in connection with the Africa Forward Summit in Kenya of 11–12 May 2026 (Zaaiman, 2026b). The French strategy combines economic-security objectives — access to critical minerals, hydrocarbons and rare earths — with the cultivation of a Francophone diplomatic perimeter through which African political agency can be channelled back into European frameworks of representation. The MACRON–YOUSSOUF exchange of 13 May 2026 is the diplomatic surface of that strategy.

Read against this contrast, the Chinese articulation of *peaceful coexistence* and the Global South project of rebuilding the Charter-based order after three decades of Western revisionism become legible as an explicit alternative to the YOUSSOUF formulation. The new paradigm presupposes that Africa speaks in its own voice, in its own forums, on its own behalf. It rejects the surrogate representation of African

interests by former colonial powers. To say, as YOUSSEF said to MACRON, “you will be our voice”, is to accept precisely the structure of hegemony that the recovery of Westphalian coexistence principles is intended to dissolve.

3. The Western Trajectory: From Westphalia to Impunity

3.1 The WOLFOWITZ Doctrine and the primacy of unilateralism

The dismantling began with the leaked draft Defense Planning Guidance for fiscal years 1994–1999, dated 18 February 1992 and produced under the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Paul WOLFOWITZ, by I. Lewis “Scooter” LIBBY and Zalmay KHALILZAD. The draft, published in part in *The New York Times* by Patrick TYLER on 8 March 1992, announced that the central strategic objective of the post-Cold-War United States was:

“to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union”
(Tyler, 1992).

The doctrine — subsequently known as the WOLFOWITZ Doctrine — asserted that American forces would remain sufficiently strong to deter potential competitors “even in the absence of a comparable adversary” and that the United States should retain the ability “to act unilaterally” or with limited allied support if collective security arrangements proved inadequate (Tyler, 1992). The implications, retained in modified form in the revised April 1992 version approved by Secretary CHENEY and General POWELL, were unmistakable: the Westphalian principles of sovereign equality and peaceful settlement were to be subordinated to the maintenance of unipolar primacy. The doctrine was disavowed publicly by the elder BUSH administration after the leak, but it was substantively retained and became the conceptual foundation of the 2002 National Security Strategy under the younger BUSH (National Security Archive, 2008).

3.2 Yugoslavia: the operationalisation of unilateralism

The doctrine was operationalised in the Yugoslav wars and decisively so in the NATO air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 24 March to 10 June 1999. The campaign was conducted without authorisation by the United Nations Security Council. It was instead justified, after the fact, by the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. The legal record is unambiguous. Bruno SIMMA, in the foundational article of the legal-academic response, concluded that:

"The October 1998 threat of air strikes against the FRY breached the UN Charter, despite NATO's effort to rely on the doctrines of necessity and humanitarian intervention" (Simma, 1999, p. 1).

Antonio CASSESE, writing in the same issue of the *European Journal of International Law*, agreed that NATO's action "falls outside the scope of the United Nations Charter and, by that token, is illegal under international law" (Cassese, 1999, p. 25), but explored whether the action might prefigure an emerging customary norm of forcible humanitarian countermeasures. Richard FALK, writing as a member of the subsequent Independent International Commission on Kosovo, acknowledged the "coherent" anti-intervention argument that bypassing UN authority was "a devastating constitutional blow to the authority of the Organization" (Falk, 1999, p. 850).

The political-legal formula that emerged from the Independent International Commission on Kosovo — "illegal but legitimate" — was the most consequential rhetorical innovation of the period. It instituted a separation between **legality** (the binding rules of the UN Charter, which prohibited the action) and **legitimacy** (a morally weighted assessment that the action could nonetheless be justified). David WIPPMAN (2001) explored the deep tensions this formula generated in international law. The separation was not innocent: it constructed a discretionary moral category through which the established Western powers could authorise themselves to act against the Charter system whose principal architects and beneficiaries they had been. Smaller states were threatened and cajoled in the Security Council to support resolutions framed around this manipulation (Falk, 1999, p. 854).

The May 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by a United States Air Force B-2 bomber — five Joint Direct Attack Munitions, three Chinese journalists killed, more than twenty wounded — was the decisive symbolic and material moment in this trajectory for Beijing. Although Washington declared the strike accidental and attributable to outdated maps, the bombing was the only target in the seventy-eight-day campaign selected by the Central Intelligence Agency rather than through the standard NATO targeting regime, and an investigation by *The Observer* and *Politiken* in October 1999 concluded that the bombing was deliberate (Vulliamy and Sweeney, 1999). In any reading, the consequences were lasting: as the analytical literature documents, the bombing accelerated Chinese investment in counterspace and precision-strike capabilities and reshaped the strategic calculus of the Chinese leadership concerning Western intentions (Perry, 2000; Shepperd, 2013).

3.3 From Yugoslavia to impunity: the TRUMP and NETANYAHU governments

The Yugoslav intervention was the inaugural moment of a Western revisionism that has since accumulated into open lawlessness. The Iraq invasion of 2003, conducted on the basis of false pretexts and without Security Council authorisation, extended the doctrine of unilateral pre-emptive use of force codified in the 2002 National Security Strategy — a direct lineal descendant of the 1992 WOLFOWITZ draft. The Libyan intervention of 2011 stretched UN Security Council Resolution 1973 well beyond its civilian-protection mandate into a regime-change operation. The trajectory culminates in the present period in two parallel and reinforcing forms of impunity.

The first is the conduct of the TRUMP administration in its second term. The systematic disregard for treaty obligations, the open coercion of allies and partners, and the explicit pursuit of territorial expansion — the renaming of Mount Denali as Mount MCKINLEY, the pressure on Greenland, the threats concerning the Panama Canal, and the rhetorical absorption of Canada into a continental perimeter — constitute, in the language of the analysis of the King's Speech of 13 May 2026, a “fused expansionist mercantilism” recovering the late-nineteenth-century MCKINLEY template (Zaaiman, 2026a, p. 1).

The second is the conduct of the NETANYAHU government in Israel. The International Court of Justice provisional measures in *South Africa v. Israel* of January 2024, the International Criminal Court arrest warrants of November 2024 against Prime Minister NETANYAHU and former Defence Minister GALLANT, and the continued conduct of operations in Gaza that the ICJ has found to involve “plausible” acts within the scope of the Genocide Convention, together constitute the most acute contemporary repudiation of the Charter-based international order. The American shielding of these operations through the UN Security Council veto and through coercive pressure on third states not to cooperate with ICC proceedings completes the lineage that begins with the legality-legitimacy separation invented over Kosovo. The same discretionary moral category that justified bombing Belgrade in 1999 now operates to neutralise binding orders of the International Court of Justice in 2024–2026.

This trajectory — WOLFOWITZ, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, TRUMP, NETANYAHU — is properly described as Western revisionism. The classical revisionist state, in the International Relations vocabulary, is the state seeking to overturn the established order. By any honest reading of the past three decades, the established Charter order has been undermined principally by its most powerful nominal guarantors, not by the rising powers that have called for its observance.

4. A Genealogy of the American Characterisation of China

The American characterisation of China across the past six decades is the inverted mirror of the Chinese characterisation of the bilateral relationship. A schematic genealogy clarifies the principal turns.

4.1 Pre-NIXON: existential adversary

Before the NIXON-KISSINGER opening, the dominant American characterisation of the People’s Republic of China was that of an existential ideological adversary, a Communist regime to be contained alongside the Soviet Union and, after 1950, to be opposed in a hot war on the Korean Peninsula. The descriptive register was that of *Red China* — a state to be diplomatically isolated and militarily contained (Kissinger, 2011, p. 235).

4.2 NIXON-MAO 1972: strategic partner against the Soviet Union

The Shanghai Communiqué of 27 February 1972 inaugurated a new register. China was characterised, implicitly, as a strategic partner in the containment of the Soviet Union. The communiqué set out that the two countries would seek “normalization” of relations and would expand “people-to-people contacts” and trade (NIXON Foundation, 2010). The substantive American framing, retrievable from the KISSINGER memoranda and *On China* (2011), was that of a quasi-alliance against Moscow. The vocabulary of strategic partnership, however imperfect, persisted through the formal normalisation of relations in 1979 and the third communiqué of 1982.

4.3 Post-Cold War to early 2000s: “responsible stakeholder”

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the strategic-partner framing was no longer sustainable. The CLINTON administration moved toward a characterisation of China as a candidate for inclusion in the American-led liberal international economic order, sealed by China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in December 2001. Deputy Secretary of State Robert ZOELLICK formalised this register in September 2005 with the characterisation of China as a potential “responsible stakeholder” — a state that would be welcomed into the established system on condition of accepting and upholding its rules. The framing presumed an asymmetric relationship in which the rules were American and the conformity Chinese.

4.4 2017: “revisionist power” and “strategic competitor”

The decisive American repositioning was the 2017 National Security Strategy. The document characterised China and Russia as:

“revisionist powers [that] want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” (White House, 2017, p. 25).

China was named a “strategic competitor” actively competing against the United States in the Indo-Pacific (White House, 2017, pp. 25, 45–46). The framing displaced the responsible-stakeholder register and announced a “new era of great power competition” (Heath, 2017). The BIDEN administration retained the framing,

refining it through alliance multipliers and technological controls (China-CEE Institute, 2024). The first TRUMP and the BIDEN administrations together produced what is best understood as a single American doctrine across two presidencies, articulated under different stylistic registers.

4.5 May 2026: “constructive strategic stability”

By May 2026, the strategic-competitor framing has been displaced — in the formal joint readout, at least — by the Chinese formula of **constructive strategic stability**. The displacement is asymmetric: it is China that has supplied the new conceptual vocabulary, and the American side has provisionally accepted it as the framing of the relationship. The *Global Times* notes that

"The US side's more objective and equal approach toward China reflects the underlying logic behind the 'new positioning' of China-US relations" (Global Times, 2026, p. 3).

The phrase “more objective and equal” is the operative one. It signals that the American claim to set the discursive terms of the relationship has been relinquished, at least in this iteration. What brought this shift about is, in the most concise rendering, the conjunction of three factors:

- the empirical foundation: Chinese manufacturing value-added now stands at approximately 29 per cent of global output, nearly matching the combined output of the United States and the European Union, and is projected to reach 45 per cent by 2030 (UNIDO, 2024);
- the strategic-military foundation: the Chinese capability to defeat the United States and NATO in a maritime contingency on its periphery, judged by Chinese analysts to be settled since 2025; and
- the diplomatic and discursive foundation: the recent reversal of the American position in the Iran confrontation, which exposed the limits of American coercive instruments and consolidated the perception that the global balance of power had shifted (Zaiman, 2026a, p. 22).

The American characterisation has, in other words, evolved under the pressure of underlying material and strategic shifts that it can no longer name as competition won.

5. The Four Initiatives and the Coherence of the New Paradigm

The Beijing summit and the **Four Stabilities** do not stand alone. They are the bilateral expression of a wider Chinese reshaping of the global governance architecture, articulated over the past five years through the Four Global Initiatives:

- the Global Development Initiative (GDI), announced by XI at the UN General Assembly in September 2021;
- the Global Security Initiative (GSI), announced at the Boao Forum in April 2022;
- the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), announced in March 2023; and
- the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), announced at the SCO Plus Meeting in Tianjin in September 2025 (Xinhua, 2025).

The four are presented officially as an integrated whole. In the formulation circulated by the *Global Times* in January 2026, the GDI “provides the material foundation; the GSI safeguards a peaceful environment; the GCI builds a consensus of values; and the GGI supplies institutional and procedural guarantees” (*Global Times*, 2026b). The whole serves the overarching objective of building a “community with a shared future for humanity” (

renlei mingyun gongtongti). BANDURSKI (2025), reviewing the consolidated People’s Daily and Qiushi presentation of the four initiatives, notes that the GSI explicitly rejects the pursuit by states of “absolute security” — a transparent reference to the post-1992 American doctrine of primacy — and advocates “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” (Bandurski, 2025). The GGI is articulated around five principles: sovereign equality, the rule of law in international affairs, multilateralism, a people-centred approach, and concrete action (Xinhua, 2025).

It is at this point that the coherence of the new paradigm becomes visible. The Four Stabilities describe the bilateral form that the relationship between the two

principal powers should take. The Four Initiatives describe the multilateral architecture within which that relationship is embedded. The two together perform three structural moves at once:

- they reinforce — they do not abandon — the core Westphalian principles of sovereign equality, non-intervention and peaceful settlement, re-interpreted for the contemporary era;
- they reposition China as the stabiliser of the system rather than its revisionist — it is the unilateralism of the past three decades that has weakened the Charter order, and the Chinese contribution is to recentre it; and
- they operate in the Weiqi style of strategic action. Innocuous incremental placements of stones at key intersections do not announce themselves as transformative; their cumulative effect becomes visible only retrospectively, when the configuration of the board reveals a new balance of power. The Beijing summit of 14 May 2026 is best read as one such revealing moment, the point at which the cumulative effect of GDI (2021), GSI (2022), GCI (2023), and GGI (2025) becomes legible in the bilateral framing of the most consequential dyad.

The Chinese worldview underlying this strategic geometry is captured in the classical formulation: the Earth is a square and the Heavens a circle. The square represents the bounded, ordered, juridical structure of states; the circle represents the encompassing, generative, cosmological frame within which the square is held. The Westphalian principles, in this reading, are the squares; the principle of *tianxia* — all-under-heaven — is the circle that contains and reconciles them (Zhao, 2021, p. 24).

6. Win-Win Cooperation: Worldview and Marxism with Chinese Characteristics

6.1 The classical philosophical anchor

The Chinese formula of *win-win cooperation* is, in Western analytical reception, easily mistaken for tactical rhetoric. It is not. It is anchored in a long-standing philosophical tradition that pre-dates the modern state system and that operates with a fundamentally different ontology of political relations than the one inherited from Hobbesian and Lockean liberalism.

ZHAO Tingyang's *tianxia* project (Zhao, 2021) reconstructs the conceptual content of this tradition. The *tianxia* or all-under-heaven framework conceives political order not as the outcome of competition among atomistic units in anarchy, but as the institutional expression of a generative cosmological whole within which units coexist. As Salvatore BABONES writes in his commentary on ZHAO's argument, the framework offers:

"a world society in which no one is excluded, everyone is respected, and win-win cooperation is the order of the ages"
(Babones, cited in Zhao, 2021).

Two further developments in contemporary Chinese International Relations scholarship reinforce this philosophical foundation. YAN Xuetong's moral realism (2011, 2019) draws on Pre-Qin Confucian and Legalist sources to argue that the rise of great powers is mediated by the moral quality of their political leadership — the distinction between *wang* (humane authority) and *ba* (hegemonic dominance). The *wang* pursues leadership through credible self-restraint, the keeping of commitments, and the willingness to underwrite public goods; the *ba* pursues leadership through coercion. Yan's argument, articulated in *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (2019), is that China's rise must be governed by the *wang* register if it is to constitute a genuine alternative to the trajectory the United States has followed since 1992.

QIN Yaqing's *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (2018) supplies the underlying ontology. QIN proposes that the metaphysical core of mainstream Western IR theory — individual rationality acting in anarchy — is itself the product of a

particular cultural community, not a universal anthropological fact. The Confucian alternative he advances is relationality: the proposition that actors' identities, motivations, and actions are constituted through their relations rather than prior to them (Qin, 2018, p. 33). Win-win cooperation is, in this framework, not an instrumental calculation but the practical expression of the recognition that the parties' interests are co-constituted through the relationship itself.

6.2 Marxism with Chinese characteristics: the dialectical other side

The classical philosophical anchor is one side of the duality. The other side is the Marxist analytical tradition through which the Chinese leadership reads its own historical moment. The two are not in tension; they are dialectically interwoven in a way that Western observers frequently misunderstand.

The doctrine of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era — codified in the 2017 amendment of the CCP constitution and in XI Jinping's collected works *The Governance of China* — is presented officially as “a new breakthrough in the Sinicization of Marxism” (CCP Central Committee, 2021). The formulation rests on what XI has called the “two combinations”: the combination of the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific reality, and the combination of those principles with China's excellent traditional culture (Bennett, 2025). The doctrine is neither pure Marxism nor pure Confucianism. It is a synthetic position that grafts a Leninist organisational form and a Marxist historical-materialist analysis onto a recovered Confucian-relational worldview.

BROWN (in ECFR, 2017) and TSANG and CHEUNG (2024) have documented this synthesis. The materialist analytical core supplies the diagnostic apparatus: contemporary world politics is structured by the contradiction between the productive forces unleashed by globalised capitalism and the relations of production — including the imperial and colonial structures — that have historically organised them. The Confucian-relational frame supplies the normative apparatus: the resolution of this contradiction is not pursued through revolutionary apocalypse but through the patient construction of a “community with a shared future for humanity” in which the developmental rights of all states are protected and the interests of the principal powers are co-constituted.

This duality — relational worldview on one side, materialist analysis on the other — is what makes the Chinese position structurally different from both the Soviet experience and the liberal-internationalist tradition. It is also what gives the formula of **win-win cooperation** its analytical weight. The formula is not a translation of the liberal positive-sum proposition; it is the practical expression of a position in which the parties' interests are conceived as co-constituted from the outset, and in which the strategic task is the cultivation of the relationship through which those interests can be advanced.

7. Conclusion: The Consolidation of a New Balance of Power

The state visit of President TRUMP to China from 12 to 15 May 2026 lasted three days. It was, by the standards of previous American presidential visits to China, a low-key affair. There was no grand strategic announcement, no signature instrument signed and held aloft, no flourish of bilateral spectacle on the American side. The Chinese side, by contrast, conducted the visit with the full repertoire of imperial ceremony: a state banquet at the Great Hall of the People, a welcoming military review with cannons and a brass band, and a joint visit to the Temple of Heaven, where the emperors had prayed for good harvests (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 5).

This asymmetry of scale and ceremony is itself part of the message. The visit was conducted on Chinese terms, in a Chinese conceptual vocabulary, with the framing of the relationship articulated by the Chinese president and accepted, in the formal joint readout, by the American one. The **constructive strategic stability** formula displaces the **strategic competition** frame that has structured American policy since 2017. The shift is not rhetorical; it is the discursive confirmation of an underlying redistribution of strategic weight.

The argument of this paper can be summarised in five propositions:

- The Chinese characterisation of the relationship through the Four Stabilities is a long-term paradigm, not a tactical concession. It is presented as such by President XI and confirmed by the joint diplomatic record. It must be enacted, not merely declared (*Global Times*, 2026, p. 5).

- The Westphalian principles of peaceful coexistence — sovereign equality, non-intervention, peaceful settlement, balance of power, mutual guarantee — are being recovered and re-interpreted by China for the New Era. China is, in this respect, the stabiliser of the international system, not its revisionist.
- The Western trajectory from the WOLFOWITZ Doctrine through Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, the TRUMP territorial-mercantilist turn and the NETANYAHU impunity in Gaza is properly described as Western revisionism. It has been the principal driver of the erosion of the Charter-based order, anchored in the legality-legitimacy manipulation invented over Kosovo.
- The American characterisation of China has moved through five registers — existential adversary, strategic partner, responsible stakeholder, revisionist power and strategic competitor, constructive partner in strategic stability — and the most recent transition has been driven not by American conceptual generosity but by the empirical, strategic and diplomatic foundations of an altered balance of power.
- The Four Stabilities and the Four Initiatives form a single coherent paradigm. The win-win cooperation formula at its core is anchored in a Confucian-relational worldview and in a Marxism with Chinese characteristics that grafts a materialist analysis onto a recovered cosmological frame. The combination is structurally different from any of the Western templates.

The state visit of three days, conducted in the modest register that the new positioning permits, is best understood as the public consolidation of an incrementally accumulated new balance of power. In the language of Weiqi, the stones placed individually and unobtrusively over the past decade — the BRI in 2013, the GDI in 2021, the GSI in 2022, the GCI in 2023, the GGI in 2025, and now the Four Stabilities in 2026 — now display their configuration. The board has changed. The new positioning is the public acknowledgement of that change. Whether the United States can travel the longer road to internalise its implications, and govern itself accordingly, is now the open question that will be answered through the multilateral summits over the remainder of the year and through the conduct of the

two governments concerning Taiwan, Iran, the Korean Peninsula and the future of the Charter system. The substance of ***constructive strategic stability*** lies in what both parties now do.

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