

## Tracing the strategic roots of Confucianism in China's contemporary foreign policy

### *Menelusuri akar strategis Konfusianisme dalam kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok kontemporer*

Probo Darono Yakti<sup>1\*</sup>, Siti Rokhmawati Susanto<sup>1</sup>, I Gede Wahyu Wicaksana<sup>1</sup> & Nadya Afdholy<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga

<sup>2</sup>Master of Literary and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga

Address: Jalan Dharmawangsa Dalam, Surabaya - 60286, East Java, Indonesia

E-mail: [probo.darono.y@fisip.unair.ac.id](mailto:probo.darono.y@fisip.unair.ac.id)

Article History: Received 3 May 2025; Accepted 3 August 2025; Published Online 18 August 2025

#### Abstract

As China asserts its global role, principles such as *harmony* (*hé*), *benevolence* (*rén*), and the *doctrine of the mean* (*zhōng yōng*) increasingly influence its diplomatic behavior. These values form the basis of what this study calls a “Defensive-Moderate Confucian Approach,” integrating strategic culture, constructivism, defensive realism, and soft power. This article examines how Confucian strategic values shape China's foreign policy, particularly under Xi Jinping's leadership. Through case studies of China's relations with the United States and India, the paper highlights how Confucian ethics guide both cooperative projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and calibrated responses in territorial disputes. While contradictions between moral ideals and strategic interests occasionally emerge, Confucianism remains a key reference in shaping China's pursuit of order and stability. The article argues that China's international conduct cannot be fully explained by materialist frameworks alone. Instead, Confucian thought offers a culturally grounded lens for interpreting its foreign policy choices. By doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions in International Relations and Chinese Studies on the enduring impact of historical values in contemporary global politics.

**Keywords:** China-US-India relations; Confucian strategy; defensive-moderate; foreign policy; strategic culture

#### Abstrak

Seiring dengan meningkatnya peran global Tiongkok, prinsip-prinsip seperti harmoni (*hé*), kebaikan hati (*rén*), dan doktrin jalan tengah (*zhōng yōng*) semakin mewarnai perilaku diplomatiknya. Nilai-nilai tersebut menjadi fondasi dari apa yang disebut dalam studi ini sebagai “Pendekatan Konfusianisme Moderat-Defensif,” yang memadukan budaya strategis, konstruktivisme, realisme defensif, dan kekuatan lunak (*soft power*). Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana nilai-nilai strategis Konfusianisme membentuk kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok, khususnya di bawah kepemimpinan Xi Jinping. Melalui studi kasus hubungan Tiongkok dengan Amerika Serikat dan India, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana etika Konfusianisme memandu baik proyek-proyek kerja sama seperti Belt and Road Initiative maupun respons yang terukur dalam sengketa teritorial. Meski sesekali muncul ketegangan antara idealisme moral dan kepentingan strategis, nilai-nilai Konfusianisme tetap menjadi acuan penting dalam upaya Tiongkok menjaga stabilitas dan ketertiban. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa perilaku internasional Tiongkok tidak dapat sepenuhnya dijelaskan melalui pendekatan materialis semata. Sebaliknya, pemikiran Konfusianisme menawarkan lensa budaya yang lebih kontekstual dalam memahami pilihan-pilihan kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok. Dengan demikian, studi ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan yang lebih luas dalam kajian Hubungan Internasional dan Studi Tiongkok mengenai pengaruh berkelanjutan nilai-nilai historis dalam politik global masa kini.

**Kata kunci:** hubungan Tiongkok-AS-India; strategi Konfusianisme; defensif-moderat; kebijakan luar negeri; budaya strategis

## Introduction

This article examines how Confucian values influence China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, framed through a “defensive-moderate” lens. Integrating strategic culture with international relations theory, it offers a richer understanding of how ideas like *hé* (harmony) and *quán* (power) shape China's

diplomatic behavior, especially in managing relations with the United States and India (Zhao 2018, Li 2022). The analysis highlights how China balances ideals of peaceful cooperation with the need to assert sovereignty and national interests. By bridging China's philosophical traditions with the realities of today's multipolar world, the article contributes to both academic and policy-oriented conversations about diplomacy in a shifting global order (Zhao 2018, Li 2022).

China's expanding influence is reshaping global geopolitics in the 21st century. Under Xi Jinping, its foreign policy has become more calculated and ideologically grounded, prompting renewed interest in the cultural roots behind Beijing's international behavior. Confucianism, as a foundation of China's strategic culture, offers a valuable lens for interpreting its global actions (Li 2022). The Chinese Communist Party often draws selectively from Confucian thought to bolster nationalism and justify assertive diplomacy (Zhao 2018). These values go beyond symbolic gestures: they reflect deeper norms shaping decision-making. Under Xi, security and economic agendas are increasingly intertwined, evident in projects like the "Chinese Dream" and the Belt and Road Initiative (An et al. 2021). These efforts modernize earlier maritime strategies such as the String of Pearls into a broader vision for global influence rooted in traditional ideals. By invoking Confucianism, Chinese leaders are constructing a diplomatic identity that challenges dominant Western narratives (Futák-Campbell & Wang 2021).

Confucianism provides a useful framework for understanding the ethical foundations of China's foreign policy. Core values like harmony, hierarchy, and face-saving continue to shape Beijing's approach on the global stage (Zhao 2018). These principles help explain China's preference for dialogue and cooperation, even as it asserts its national interests through diplomacy and soft power (Li 2022). Yet China's foreign policy is not purely idealistic. It is guided by pragmatic considerations of security and economic strategy. The "Chinese Dream" exemplifies this blend, combining Confucian ideals with aspirations for national revival and international respect (Li 2022). It represents not only a vision of prosperity, but also the cultural and moral renewal of China's civilizational identity (Wu & Devine 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) embodies China's blend of cultural tradition and strategic intent. Promoting infrastructure, connectivity, and long-term cooperation, the BRI reflects Confucian values such as harmony and mutual benefit (Chiebuka et al. 2025). At the same time, it highlights China's expanding role in shaping global norms to align with its national interests (Jones & Zeng 2019). In dealing with both the United States and India, China adopts a "defensive-moderate" approach. With the U.S., it navigates competition while keeping diplomatic and economic channels open (Li 2022). In its relationship with India, Beijing combines cultural diplomacy and dialogue with assertive responses to territorial disputes and regional rivalry (Alagappa 2010, Pardesi 2021). This careful balancing reflects China's aim to ascend peacefully without provoking open conflict.

China's "defensive-moderate" strategy reflects a fusion of Confucian heritage and real-world pragmatism. Rather than relying solely on military power, Beijing increasingly emphasizes soft and normative influence in its global engagements (Yıldırımçakar 2024). It strengthens its position through internal development like economic expansion and military modernization, while simultaneously building multilateral ties and partnerships to achieve soft balancing (Wang 2010). Confucian principles such as moderation (*zhōng yōng*), ritual order (*lǐ*), and harmony (*hé*) remain key in guiding this approach, allowing China to assert itself without provoking major conflict. These traditional values continue to shape how China views its role on the world stage (Li 2022). In both rhetoric and diplomacy, Beijing portrays itself as a force for global stability especially in its dealings with major powers like the U.S. and India (Zhao 2018). Strategic culture theory helps explain this continuity, showing how deeply embedded norms influence foreign policy over time (Johnston 1995). Under Xi Jinping, Confucian ideas are not just symbolic. They are used alongside realist strategies to reinforce China's assertiveness while maintaining a posture of restraint.

Recent studies describe China's strategy as a Confucian-influenced "defensive-moderate" approach; one that allows calculated assertiveness when national interests are at risk (Feng 2015). Xi Jinping's vision of national rejuvenation, embodied in the "Chinese Dream," connects this stance to historical

continuity rather than territorial ambition (Pan & Lo 2017, Feng & He 2021). This orientation is visible in China's active participation in multilateral platforms like ASEAN, BRICS, and the SCO, as well as in its pragmatic use of peace-oriented rhetoric in disputed areas such as the South China Sea (Zhao 2023). Several theoretical perspectives reinforce this view. Constructivism explains how Chinese leaders reinterpret Confucian values to align with evolving strategic goals (Uemura 2013). Defensive realism captures Beijing's focus on preserving security over seeking hegemony (Zhang 2002). The balance-of-threat theory offers insights into how China differentiates its responses based on perceived intentions of other states (Papageorgiou et al. 2024). Meanwhile, soft power theory highlights the role of cultural diplomacy and governance models in projecting China's influence globally (Liu & Tsai 2014, Pan 2022).

This article introduces the "Confucian Defensive-Moderate" framework, which integrates five key theoretical perspectives to explain China's foreign policy behavior: (1) *Strategic Culture*, rooted in Confucian norms and values; (2) *Constructivism*, emphasizing evolving identity and social context; (3) *Defensive Realism*, prioritizing security and restraint; (4) *Balance of Threat Theory*, highlighting calculated and proportional responses; and (5) *Soft Power Theory*, focusing on narrative control and cultural diplomacy (Feng 2009, Uemura 2013). Together, these approaches provide a multidimensional lens to better understand the shifts in China's international strategy. This study aims to explore three central questions: (1) How deeply do Confucian principles shape China's strategic culture in the Xi Jinping era? (2) In what ways is this "defensive-moderate" posture evident in China's dealings with the United States and India? (3) Which theoretical approach or combination thereof best captures the interaction between cultural traditions and strategic pragmatism in China's foreign policy?

## Research Method

This research employs a qualitative approach using case study and comparative analysis to explore the role of Confucianism in shaping China's foreign policy (Gilboy & Heginbotham 2012). The focus on China's relations with the United States and India stems from their strategic importance and differing geopolitical dynamics. Examining these two cases allows for a clearer understanding of how Beijing applies a "defensive-moderate" strategy in managing its interactions with both a dominant global power and a rising regional rival.

To examine these dynamics, the study uses a comparative approach to highlight patterns and contrasts in China's diplomatic conduct toward the United States and India. It draws on primary sources such as official policy documents, speeches by Xi Jinping, and recent government white papers to identify the presence of Confucian values and rhetoric in state discourse (Xiao 2024). These are supplemented with secondary sources including academic works, think-tank analyses, and expert commentaries to place China's foreign policy strategies within relevant theoretical frameworks. This analysis applies an integrated theoretical framework that combines Strategic Culture, Constructivism, Defensive Realism, Balance of Threat, and Soft Power into what is termed the "Confucian Defensive-Moderate" perspective. By weaving together traditional values with modern strategic thought, this approach helps explain how Confucian principles and pragmatic interests jointly shape China's behavior on the world stage.

## Results and Discussion

This section examines how Confucian strategic culture informs China's approach to its relationships with the United States and India. Drawing on both academic analysis and diplomatic practice, it reveals that core values such as *hé* (harmony), *yì* (righteousness), *zhōng yōng* (moderation), and *miànzi* (face) shape China's tone and behavior on the international stage. These values operate not in isolation, but in response to today's geopolitical realities, including U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific and India's increasing regional clout. Though Confucian ideals are frequently echoed in Beijing's foreign policy language, their implementation often reflects a pragmatic fusion of cultural legacy and strategic necessity.

China's engagements with the United States and India illustrate two distinct yet interconnected applications of Confucian principles. In dealing with the U.S., Beijing generally leans on restraint and patience, drawing from Confucian thought to uphold a defensive-moderate strategy that favors

negotiation over conflict. Its approach to India, by contrast, is more nuanced firm on territorial disputes, especially along the border, but still open to cooperation in multilateral settings. This divergence highlights how Confucianism functions less as a strict doctrine and more as a flexible guide, allowing Chinese policymakers to tailor their behavior in response to shifting threats, cultural contexts, and the nature of each bilateral relationship.

### **Confucianism and the concept of Tianxia in shaping China's strategic culture**

Confucianism has deeply influenced China's worldview, shaping both its internal governance and external diplomacy (Zhang 2002). Originating from Confucius's teachings during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), it emphasizes moral leadership, harmony, and peaceful conflict resolution. These values continue to guide how Chinese leaders perceive their global responsibilities. Central to this tradition is the idea of *Tianxia* or “all under heaven” a vision of world order based on ethical authority rather than force. Though philosophical in origin, *Tianxia* informs China's strategic outlook, shaping its stance on sovereignty and diplomacy by blending moral principles with pragmatic goals (Amalia 2021). While Confucianism was sidelined during Mao Zedong's rule, it re-emerged during Deng Xiaoping's reform era and now features prominently in Xi Jinping's leadership as a framework for guiding both domestic legitimacy and international engagement.

Key Confucian values: *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety), and *Zhi* (wisdom) continue to shape China's approach to international relations (Khan et al. 2022). *Ren*, emphasizing empathy and harmony, is central to Xi Jinping's call for “a community with a shared future for mankind,” promoting global cooperation as a path to shared prosperity (Nathan & Zhang 2022). *Yi* supports China's push for fairness in global governance, evident in its advocacy to reform international institutions and elevate the voice of developing countries (Modestus 2023). *Li* informs China's diplomatic etiquette, reinforcing respect for sovereignty, peaceful negotiation, and non-interference. Meanwhile, *Zhi*, representing wisdom, guides Beijing's cautious and strategic diplomacy reflected in Deng Xiaoping's principle to “hide strength and bide time” (Yu 2024). Together, these values help translate Confucian ethics into a contemporary diplomatic outlook, offering a philosophical grounding for China's global engagement.

The Confucian idea of *Tianxia*, meaning “all under heaven,” envisions a world led by virtuous governance and bound by harmony. In China's modern foreign policy, this ancient worldview has been reinterpreted as a vision for an inclusive and cooperative global order (Callahan 2008). Chinese scholars often invoke *Tianxia* to promote a civilizational identity that challenges Western-dominated paradigms, emphasizing relational politics and cultural cohesion rooted in Chinese traditions (Puranen 2019). This perspective underpins initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which goes beyond infrastructure and trade to promote cultural exchange and global connectivity. The *Tianxia* ethos also supports China's push for “democratic international relations” as a counter-narrative to Western hegemony calling instead for equality and multipolar balance (Callahan 2008, Carlson 2011). Xi Jinping's call for a “community with a shared future for mankind” reflects this modern interpretation, highlighting partnership over power politics. China's non-interventionist stance, echoing Confucian respect for harmony and hierarchical stability, reinforces its image as a civilization-state with a unique strategic outlook (Puranen 2019).

China often presents itself as a responsible global actor committed to justice and harmonious international relations an image grounded in Confucian ideals (Zhao 2018). However, the consistency of this narrative is frequently debated. While traditional values inform Beijing's worldview, its foreign policy is also shaped by historical traumas, particularly the “Century of Humiliation,” which continues to influence China's sensitivity to perceived external threats. This blend of cultural philosophy and national insecurity complicates efforts to analyze China through conventional Western theories. As a result, some scholars propose a “Confucian geopolitics” approach, one that integrates ethical traditions with strategic adaptation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) embodies this duality, promoting mutual benefit and relational harmony while advancing China's global presence (An et al. 2021). In relations with major powers, Confucian references are evident but flexible. With the United States, China underscores



dialogue and peaceful coexistence, though this is often shadowed by mistrust of American containment strategies. In contrast, its approach to India blends cooperative overtures with firm actions during border tensions, revealing a more nuanced and situational use of Confucian principles. These examples suggest that while Confucianism remains a guiding framework, its application is deeply contextual, shaped by both philosophical heritage and evolving geopolitical realities.

### China's foreign policy toward the United States and India

Under Xi Jinping, China's approach to the United States reflects a blend of Confucian ideals such as harmony (*hé*) and propriety (*lǐ*) with strategic principles rooted in defensive realism (Aldora 2024). Even as U.S.–China relations became increasingly tense, especially during the Trump administration, Chinese officials consistently framed their actions as moderate and peace-oriented. This balancing act was particularly visible during the 2018–2020 trade war. While Washington escalated the conflict with sweeping tariffs and restrictions on Chinese tech firms, Beijing responded with restraint. Instead of matching every provocation, China issued limited retaliatory tariffs and maintained dialogue, eventually culminating in the Phase One trade agreement. This measured posture aimed to protect key interests without escalating into outright conflict (Feng & He 2021). Such behavior highlights China's emphasis on preserving economic stability and international credibility, hallmarks of a strategic culture influenced by Confucian norms. By prioritizing order, long-term advantage, and relational balance over short-term retaliation, Beijing's actions reflect a deeper commitment to maintaining stability within an evolving hierarchy of power (Zhang 2023).

A similar pattern emerges in the South China Sea, where China employs a "defensive-moderate" strategy in contrast to the United States' more overt use of hard power. Beijing's construction and militarization of artificial islands, along with its deployment of Coast Guard and maritime militia, underscore its resolve to assert territorial claims (Burgess 2016, Cheng-Chwee 2017). Yet, these assertive actions are often balanced by diplomatic initiatives such as its participation in ASEAN-led Code of Conduct talks, signaling a preference for controlled escalation over open confrontation. Meanwhile, the U.S. continues to rely on military deterrence, conducting regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and deploying naval assets to the region. These efforts, positioned as defenses of international maritime law, reinforce Washington's reliance on hard-power signaling (Fravel 2020, Fravel & Miura 2020). In the Taiwan Strait, China similarly frames its posture as defensive, rooted in historical claims rather than expansionist ambitions. By calibrating its actions to avoid direct conflict while incrementally strengthening its position, China aims to reshape regional dynamics without crossing the threshold into war.

The Taiwan issue encapsulates the broader tensions between China's strategic restraint and U.S. assertiveness. Beijing has increased military drills and diplomatic pressure on Taipei to reinforce its One China principle. At the same time, it continues to project a "defensive-moderate" stance by promoting peaceful reunification and deepening cross-strait economic ties. Initiatives such as "One Country, Two Systems" and ongoing trade engagement are aimed at reducing tensions while keeping long-term unification as a strategic goal. This dual-track approach, firm yet measured, embodies the Confucian-influenced balancing act that defines China's foreign policy. In contrast, Washington has responded with sustained military support to Taiwan, arms sales, and high-level political gestures, including former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial 2022 visit to Taipei, often viewed by Beijing as part of a broader containment agenda (Farooq 2023). These moves have reinforced China's perception of encirclement, prompting it to react through calibrated shows of force rather than open conflict (Chen et al. 2025). This dynamic reveals the ongoing friction between China's Confucian-rooted preference for strategic moderation and the U.S. reliance on deterrence and power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

Under Xi Jinping, China's strategy toward India reflects a dual-track approach: asserting sovereignty, particularly through the Confucian value of *Yi* (righteousness), while simultaneously emphasizing *Ren* (benevolence) to support regional stability and redirect military focus toward broader strategic priorities (Fravel 2020). Despite recurring tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Beijing continues

to pursue economic engagement and diplomatic dialogue. The 2017 Doklam standoff demonstrated China's firm commitment to defending its territorial claims, yet it also revealed a readiness to de-escalate through discreet diplomatic channels. Similarly, following the deadly 2020 Galwan Valley clash, China prioritized high-level negotiations over prolonged confrontation, reflecting a calculated effort to balance assertiveness with pragmatic restraint (Bharti 2024b).

**Table 1.**  
The comparison between China-US and China-India relations is based on the dominant Confucian principles

Aspects of Relations	China-US	China-India
Dominant Confucian Principles	<i>He</i> (harmony) & <i>Zhong Yong</i> (doctrine of balance)	<i>Ren</i> (benevolence) & <i>Yi</i> (righteousness in hierarchical relationships)
Overall Approach	Defensive-moderate, avoiding direct conflict escalation while maintaining strategic claims and interests.	A combination of assertiveness in territorial issues and cooperation in economic and multilateral diplomacy
Trade & Economy	China responded to the US trade war (2018–2020) with limited counter-tariffs and negotiations for the Phase One Deal (Feng & He 2021)	China continues to promote trade cooperation despite India restricting Chinese technology and investment and opting out of RCEP (Yuan 2016, Ghosh et al. 2018)
Security & Military	Responded to US FONOPs in the South China Sea by increasing maritime patrols and ASEAN diplomacy while avoiding confrontation (Fravel & Miura 2020)	Assertive stance in border conflicts such as the Galwan clash (2020) but emphasizes diplomatic solutions through bilateral negotiations (Bharti 2024b)
Multilateral Cooperation	China advocates multipolarity through BRICS and SCO but faces US containment strategies in the Indo-Pacific.	BRICS and SCO serve as platforms to maintain stability and manage regional competition without escalation
Taiwan & LAC (Line of Actual Control)	Uses a defensive-moderate approach with limited military drills and economic diplomacy, while the US counters with military support for Taiwan (Farooq 2023)	In border conflicts, Beijing adopts a balancing strategy between military response and diplomacy, avoiding open war (Fravel 2020)
Global Narrative	Promotes the "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" as a response to US containment strategies (An et al. 2021)	Applies the <i>Tianxia</i> concept in building a more inclusive regional order in Asia (Chaulia 2021)
Paradoxes & Challenges	China's actions in the South China Sea and Taiwan are often seen as contradicting its rhetoric of harmony and cooperation (Zhao 2018)	Despite promoting stability, China's policies in the Himalayas continue to face resistance from India due to geopolitical rivalry (Cooper & Farooq 2016)

Source: Attached in table

Despite persistent geopolitical frictions, economic engagement remains a key pillar of China's approach to India. Beijing continues to view India as an important trade partner and a growing market for Chinese technology and investment (Yuan 2016). Even as New Delhi imposes restrictions on firms like TikTok and Huawei, China maintains economic outreach through multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Although India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Beijing's regional vision shaped by the Confucian-inspired concept of *Tianxia*, which emphasizes shared prosperity remains intact (Ghosh et al. 2018). Institutions like BRICS and the SCO provide mechanisms for managing rivalry through structured cooperation (Chaulia 2021).

Moreover, China's promotion of multipolarity aligns with India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, creating space for continued dialogue despite divergences (Cooper & Farooq 2016, Freeman 2018). As India deepens its engagement with the U.S. and the Quad, China responds with a strategy of coexistence balancing strategic competition with pragmatic cooperation. This posture echoes Confucian ideals of harmony, mutual respect, and restrained assertiveness (Chaulia 2021).

Nonetheless, the integration of Confucian strategic culture into China's foreign policy has not been without inconsistencies. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and escalating tensions with Taiwan often stand in contrast to its official discourse promoting harmony and peaceful coexistence (Zhao 2018, Feng & He 2021). Similarly, while the Belt and Road Initiative is presented as a platform for mutual development, it has raised international concerns about debt dependency and China's expanding geopolitical influence. Despite these criticisms, Confucian ideals continue to shape the initiative's ideological narrative. Under Xi Jinping, China's diplomatic language increasingly reflects traditional moral values, as seen in slogans like the "Chinese Dream" and "a community with a shared future for mankind" both of which resonate with Confucian themes of collective harmony and ethical leadership (An et al. 2021).

As shown in Table 1, Confucian values do not lead to a one-size-fits-all policy. Instead, China adapts these principles to suit the unique challenges posed by its relationships with the United States and India. While themes like stability and equilibrium remain consistent, Beijing's actions reflect the specific dynamics of each bilateral context. Foundational concepts such as harmony (*hé*), wisdom (*zhì*), and righteousness (*yì*) continue to shape China's diplomatic narrative, even when its behavior on the ground appears more pragmatic than idealistic (Li 2022). Recognizing this philosophical foundation is essential for interpreting how China navigates global politics, where tradition and strategy increasingly intersect.

### Confucian influence in China–U.S. relations

Confucian values have deeply influenced China's strategic outlook, shaping how it perceives threats and navigates foreign relations. This legacy remains visible in Beijing's contemporary approach to major powers like the United States (Tan & Soong 2024). Rooted in over two millennia of Chinese political and cultural life, Confucianism continues to guide decision-making under Xi Jinping. A key concept, *Zhong Yong*: the doctrine of the mean promotes moderation and balance, encouraging policies that avoid extremes. In practice, this results in a diplomatic style that is cautious and measured, yet firm in defending core national interests. Rather than pursuing rapid gains or aggressive stances, Chinese leaders emphasize gradualism and long-term stability. This approach is evident in the management of sensitive territorial disputes, including in the South China Sea and along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India (Šimalčík 2020). Despite periods of heightened tension, such as during the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, Beijing has generally avoided full-scale military conflict, opting instead for dialogue, economic engagement, and multilateral diplomacy to preserve regional order.

Confucianism plays a key role in shaping how China perceives threats in the international system. The concept of *hé* (harmony) frames global affairs as ideally balanced, leading China to interpret moves like the U.S. "pivot to Asia" or the expansion of the Quad not just as military strategies, but as threats to regional stability (Zhou & Esteban 2018). The idea of *dé* (moral authority) shapes China's identity as a responsible global actor, driving efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative to promote development and stability abroad. *Lǐ* (order and hierarchy) helps explain China's sensitivity to issues like the South China Sea and Taiwan, where it seeks to uphold what it sees as the rightful regional order. At the same time, the principle of *xiūshēn* (self-cultivation) reflects China's focus on domestic development and stability as a foundation for expanding its global influence (Ji 2015).

China's foreign policy is often guided by Confucian ethical principles like *rén* (benevolence) and *yì* (righteousness), reinforcing its narrative of peace and shared prosperity. These values are reflected in slogans such as the "community of shared future for mankind" (Khan et al. 2022, Li 2022). Meanwhile, the Confucian ideal of *zhīshì* or learning from history, informs Beijing's cautious yet strategic approach

to diplomacy. Rather than seek rapid gains, China favors steady, long-term engagement shaped by historical lessons. The value of *hé* (harmony) encourages consensus-building and stability-focused decisions, while *miànzi* (face) plays a crucial role in shaping assertive responses when China perceives its national dignity or international image under threat.

A clear example of Confucian strategic thinking at work is China's Belt and Road Initiative in contrast to the U.S.-supported Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Uddin & Lau 2023). While IPEF focuses on digital trade, standards, and supply chain security, the BRI emphasizes physical infrastructure, long-term connectivity, and economic interdependence, principles aligned with *hé* (harmony) and mutual benefit (Zhao 2021). Rather than pursuing quick dominance, the BRI reflects a deliberate and patient approach rooted in Confucian ideals of gradual, lasting influence. China uses development aid and infrastructure partnerships to present itself as a responsible and benevolent power, sidestepping direct confrontation with U.S. leadership. From a Confucian perspective, influence arises from moral legitimacy and economic attraction, not coercion. In contrast, the IPEF's framing as a counterweight to the BRI underscores the challenge of applying Confucian principles in a competitive global environment. China's response has been to double down on regional stability and advocate for cooperative, win-win solutions continuing to project its soft power through cultural values, even as strategic rivalry deepens (Uddin & Lau 2023, Zreik 2025).

China's behavior in the South China Sea (SCS) offers a clear example of how Confucian values shape its strategic response to U.S. military presence. Rather than opting for direct confrontation, Beijing adopts a dual-track strategy asserting sovereignty through island-building and military deployments while simultaneously pursuing diplomacy to reduce tensions (Fravel 2011, Rosyidin 2019). This reflects the Confucian principle of *zhong yong* (the golden mean), which favors balance and moderation (Bharti 2024b). The concept of *mianzi* (face) also plays a key role, driving China's firm reactions to U.S. freedom of navigation operations while stopping short of open escalation (Ho 2016, Xue 2023). In this way, China's approach aligns with a deeper Confucian logic: sustainable influence comes not from coercion, but from moral authority and long-term strategic foresight (Wang 2024). Beijing's calibrated behavior in the SCS, projecting strength while avoiding war, illustrates its commitment to what may be called a Confucian defensive-moderate strategy: one that blends power with restraint, and ambition with order.

### Confucian influence in China–India relations

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrates how Confucian values influence its strategic approach in South Asia (Fang 2024). Prioritizing infrastructure, economic connectivity, and long-term cooperation, the BRI embodies ideals like harmony, interdependence, and strategic patience. Its slow, steady expansion reflects a Confucian emphasis on stability over confrontation. Yet, the initiative, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has raised concerns in India, where it is perceived as a challenge to regional sovereignty, deepening strategic distrust (Sachdeva 2018, Bharti 2024a).

The BRI allows China to project itself as a benevolent power, prioritizing development over rivalry (Farwa 2018). This image aligns with Confucian ideals of moral leadership and mutual prosperity. However, India remains wary, viewing the initiative less as a cooperative endeavor and more as a strategic maneuver. This tension highlights the gap between China's cultural narrative and the geopolitical realities perceived by its neighbors (Basrur 2019). Border tensions have further illustrated China's Confucian-informed strategy. In both the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, Beijing asserted its position through troop mobilization and infrastructure development, yet also pursued prolonged diplomatic talks to avoid wider conflict (Aldora 2024, Bharti 2024b). Even after casualties, China emphasized dialogue seeking stability without compromising its territorial claims.

China's reluctance to escalate into full conflict reflects a long-term strategy rooted in moderation. Rather than pursuing decisive victory, Beijing prefers controlled engagements and calibrated disengagements approaches informed by *zhong yong* (the doctrine of the mean) (Fravel 2020). National image (*mianzi*)



also plays a crucial role, as China's domestic legitimacy partially rests on perceptions of strength. Consequently, Beijing must respond firmly to perceived challenges, but without triggering wider instability (Dingli 2010).

Although Confucian principles shape China's diplomatic posture, their application is not always consistent. India's focus on strategic autonomy frequently challenges China's preference for hierarchical order in international relations (Hall 2020, An et al. 2021). While Beijing promotes harmony in its rhetoric, its firm actions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) often run counter to those ideals. This tension highlights the disconnect between China's philosophical framing and its real-world strategic behavior. More broadly, China faces challenges in applying Confucian ethics within today's multipolar world. Ideas rooted in hierarchy and order sometimes clash with global norms that prioritize state equality and sovereignty (Gonzalez-Vicente 2021). Although Beijing emphasizes mutual benefit, its pursuit of national interests is often seen as self-centered. Cultural differences can also lead to misinterpretations what China frames as moral leadership may be perceived by others as veiled hegemony. These tensions underscore the difficulty of translating Confucian ideals into practice amid the realities of modern geopolitics (An et al. 2021).

## Conclusion

In sum, China's approach to the United States and India reflects the enduring influence of Confucian strategic culture. Values like moderation (*zhōng yōng*), harmony (*hé*), and moral authority (*rén*) shape its preference for cautious diplomacy, economic cooperation, and steady long-term goals. Yet, translating these ideals into action often proves challenging in a fast-changing global landscape. The "defensive-moderate" framework offers a useful lens for understanding how China tries to assert its interests while maintaining a commitment to stability at both regional and global levels.

This pattern extends beyond bilateral ties to China's wider foreign policy efforts, including the Belt and Road Initiative and the vision of a "community of shared future for mankind." These initiatives show how Beijing blends its cultural heritage with modern geopolitical goals. While material interests remain key, this study highlights the crucial role of cultural and ideational factors in shaping China's global behavior. The Confucian "defensive-moderate" framework provides a nuanced, culturally rooted lens that avoids simplistic labels like status quo or revisionist. Instead, it presents China as a strategic actor guided by both historical legacy and forward-looking ambition. Future research should apply this culturally informed perspective to other global players, offering richer insights into how civilizational values shape international relations today.

## References

- Alagappa M (2010) Strengthening international studies in India. *International Studies* 46 (1-2):7-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002088171004600203>.
- Aldora C (2024) Dualism in China's strategic culture implementation through 'Confucian-Pacifism' and 'Cultural Realism' in tackling border problems. *JUSS (Jurnal Sosial Soedirman)* [S.l.] 7 (2):238-257. <https://doi.org/10.20884/juss.v7i2.13056>.
- Amalia AI (2021) Repositioning culture in international relations: Confucianism as geopolitical instrument. *Jurnal Transformasi Global* 8 (2):120-127.
- An N, Sharp J, & Shaw I (2021) Towards a Confucian geopolitics. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11 (2):218-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620951354>.
- Basrur RM (2019) The BRI and India's grand strategy. *Strategic Analysis* 43: 187-198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1598082>.
- Bharti MS (2024a) China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in South Asia and its policy challenges to India in the region. *South Asian Survey* 30 (2):154-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09715231231218827>.
- Bharti MS (2024b) China –India border disputes: An analytical analysis of Doklam standoff to Tawang clash. *Asian Journal of Political Science* 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2024.2429084>.

- Burgess SF (2016) Rising bipolarity in the South China Sea: The American rebalance to Asia and China's expansion. *Contemporary Security Policy* 37 (1):111-143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1149968>.
- Callahan WA (2008) Chinese visions of world order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony? *International Studies Review* 10 (4):749-761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>.
- Carlson AR (2011) Moving beyond sovereignty? A brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the Tianxia concept. *Journal of Contemporary China* 20 (68):89-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2011.520848>.
- Chaulia S (2021) In spite of the spite: An Indian view of China and India in BRICS. *Global policy* 12 (4):519-523. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13009>.
- Chen X-Y, Lin T-H, & Chen C-JJ (2025) Deterrence, assurance, and countermeasures: Insights from Pelosi's Taiwan visit and Chinese military exercises. *Asian Survey* 65 (1):131-159. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2024.2408270>.
- Cheng-Chwee K (2017) Explaining the contradiction in China's South China Sea policy: Structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal* 15 (1):163-186. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2017.0009>.
- Chiebuka AQ, Janet OO, & Oluchi OC (2025) The Belt and Road Initiative: China's vision for global connectivity and soft power influence. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies* 51 (1):262-272. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2025/v51i11745>.
- Cooper AF & Farooq AB (2016) The role of China and India in the G20 and BRICS: Commonalities or competitive behaviour? *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 45 (3):73-106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261604500303>.
- Dingli S (2010) Building China-India reconciliation. *Asian Perspective* 34 (4):139-163. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2010.0009>.
- Fang S (2024) The Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitical implications for South Asia. In: *Proceedings of ICGPSH 2024 Workshop: Industry 5 and Society 5 – A Study from The Global Politics and Socio-Humanity Perspective*. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media* 71: 34-39. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/71/2025LC0006>.
- Farooq M (2023) US' Taiwan strategy: An instrument to contain China. *Margalla Papers* 27 (1):96-108.
- Farwa U (2018) Belt and Road Initiative and China's strategic culture. *Strategic Studies* 38 (3):40-56. <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.038.03.00143>.
- Feng H (2015) *Foreign Policy Analysis in China*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Feng H & He K (2021) A dynamic strategic culture model and China's behavior in the South China Sea. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (4):510-529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1642301>.
- Feng H (2009) A dragon on defense: Explaining China's strategic culture. In: Johnson JL, Kartchner KM, & Larsen JA (ed) *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. *Initiatives in Strategic Studies: Issues and Policies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230618305\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230618305_11).
- Fravel MT & Miura K (2020) Stormy seas: The South China Sea in US-China relations. *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper*, Forthcoming. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3680649>.
- Fravel MT (2020) Stability in a secondary strategic direction: China and the border dispute with India after 1962. In: Bajpai K, Ho S, & Miller MC (ed). *Routledge handbook of China-India relations* (1st ed). London: Routledge.
- Fravel MT (2011) China's strategy in the South China Sea. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 33 (3):292-319. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41446232>.
- Freeman CP (2018) China's 'regionalism foreign policy' and China-India relations in South Asia. *Contemporary Politics* 24 (1):81-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1408168>.
- Futák-Campbell B & Wang J (2021) Is there such a thing as a Confucianist Chinese foreign policy? A case study of the Belt and Road Initiative. In Futák-Campbell B (ed). *Globalizing Regionalism and International Relations* (1st ed). Bristol: Bristol University Press. 153-180. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nh3md7.13>.
- Ghosh N, Pal P, Chakraborty J, & Ray R (2018) China-India relations in economic forums: Examining the regional comprehensive economic partnership. *Occasional paper*. Observer Research Foundation 50.

- Gilboy GJ & Heginbotham E (2012) Foreign Policy, Use of Force, and Border Settlements. In *Chinese and Indian Strategic Behavior: Growing Power and Alarm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 40-93.
- Gonzalez-Vicente R (2021) Why a critical geopolitics cannot be Confucian. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11 (2):248-252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206211017769>.
- Hall I (2020) China in India's strategic thought. In: *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* (1st ed). London: Routledge. 151-166.
- Ho BT (2016) About Face—the relational dimension in Chinese IR discourse. *Journal of Contemporary China* 25 (98):307-320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1075715>.
- Ji M (2015) Expectations and realities: Managing the risks of the "Belt and Road" Initiative. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 1 (3):497-522. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740015500244>.
- Johnston AI (1995) *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Vol. 178). New Jersey: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzxx9p0>.
- Jones L & Zeng J (2019) Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis. *Third World Quarterly* 40 (8):1415-1439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1559046>.
- Khan U, Wang H, Cui Z, Begum A, Mohamed A, & Han H (2022) The philosophical thought of Confucius and Mencius, and the concept of the community of a shared future for mankind. *Sustainability* 14 (16):9854. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14169854>.
- Li X (2022) The role of Confucian ethics in the foreign policy directions of modern China, *Administrative Consulting* 5: 132-140. <https://doi.org/10.22394/1726-1139-2022-5-132-140>.
- Liu TTT & Tsai TC (2014) Swords into ploughshares? China's soft power strategy in Southeast Asia and its challenges. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 57 (special edition):28-48. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201400203>.
- Modestus Q (2023) Yi is a guiding principle of China's foreign policy in Africa. *Journal of Developing Societies* 39 (2):218-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X231165144>.
- Nathan AJ & Zhang B (2022) A shared future for mankind: Rhetoric and reality in Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. *Journal of Contemporary China* 31 (133):57-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1926091>.
- Pan P (2022) The Chinese state and soft power. *BCP Social Sciences & Humanities* 20: 507-516. <https://doi.org/10.54691/bcpssh.v20i.2366>.
- Pan S & Lo JT (2017) Re-conceptualizing China's rise as a global power: a neo-tributary perspective. *The Pacific Review* 30 (1):1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2015.1075578>.
- Papageorgiou M, Can M, & Vieira A (2024) China as a threat and balancing behavior in the realm of emerging technologies. *Chinese Political Science Review* 9: 441-482. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-024-00248-0>.
- Pardesi MS (2021) Explaining the asymmetry in the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75 (3):341-365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2021.1893267>.
- Puranen M (2019) All under heaven as one family: Tianxiaist ideology and the emerging Chinese great power identity. *Journal of China and International Relations* 7 (1):44-61. <https://doi.org/10.5278/jcir.v7i1.6637>.
- Rosyidin M (2019) The Dao of foreign policy: Understanding China's dual strategy in the South China Sea. *Contemporary Security Policy* 40 (2):214-238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1565374>.
- Sachdeva G (2018) Indian perceptions of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. *International Studies* 55 (4):285-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881718807359>.
- Šimalčík M (2020) China and the South China Sea conflict: A case for Confucian strategic culture? *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* 1 (1):2050002. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2717541320500023>.
- Tan W & Soong JJ (2024) Opportunities and Challenges of China's Economic and Political Development under the Third Term of Xi Leadership: A Viewpoint of India. *The Chinese Economy* 58 (1):35-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2024.2373645>.
- Uddin MJ & Lau R.-S (2023) Rules-based international order and US Indo-Pacific strategy: what does it mean for China's BRI? *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 9 (1):386-400. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2391392u>.

- Uemura T (2013) Understanding Sino-Japanese relations: Proposing a constructivist approach in Chinese studies. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 2 (1):95-127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2013.11869059>.
- Wang W (2024) Reconciling China's maritime discourses of nationalism and international engagement with left Confucian logic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11 (275). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02774-3>.
- Wang Y (2010) China's response to the unipolar world: The strategic logic of peaceful development. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45 (5):554-567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909610373898>.
- Wu B & Devine N (2018) Self-cultivation and the legitimation of power: Governing China through education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50 (13):1192-1202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1395737>.
- Xiao S (2024) Navigating contradictions in Chinese diplomacy: The dual narratives of "peaceful rise" and "class struggle" in soft power discourse. In: *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies. Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media* 40: 38-45. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/40/20240694>.
- Xue Y (2023) China as a great power: Reconsidering face culture in Chinese foreign policy. *International Journal* 78 (4):521-538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020231213601>.
- Yıldırımçakar E (2024) China's ambition to balance power within the framework of soft and normative power concepts. *Current Research in Social Sciences* 10 (2):194-210. <https://doi.org/10.30613/curesosc.1498132>.
- Yu Y (2024) Holistic pragmatism: The Chinese approach on international relations. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe—International Relations* 4 (9). <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17810.1>.
- Yuan J (2016) Sino-Indian economic ties since 1988: Progress, problems, and prospects for future development. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 45 (3):31-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261604500302>.
- Zhang B (2023) Hoping for the best, preparing for the worst: China's varied responses to US strategic competition. *Journal of Contemporary China* 33 (146):352-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2201170>.
- Zhang T (2002) Chinese strategic culture: Traditional and present features. *Comparative Strategy* 21 (2):73-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930290043056>.
- Zhao M (2021) The Belt and Road Initiative and China-US strategic competition. *China International Strategy Review* 3: 248-260. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00087-7>.
- Zhao Q (2018) The influence of Confucianism on Chinese politics and foreign policy. *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7 (4):321-328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-03-2018-0057>.
- Zhou, W., & Esteban, M. (2018). Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Contemporary China* 27 (112):487-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433476>.
- Zhao L (2023) China's engagements in the reconstruction of international economic rules: Practical contributions. In: *Modern China and international rules: Reconstruction and innovation*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. 293-318.
- Zreik M (2025) Navigating new waters: China's strategic responses to the Indo-Pacific economic framework for prosperity. *Asian Journal of Political Science* 33 (1):107-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2024.2399064>.

## Author Biographies

**Probo Darono Yakti** is a Lecturer in International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, and Director of the Center for National Defense and Security Studies. His research interests include Asian geopolitics, Indonesian maritime strategy, and European security institutions. His notable publications cover Indonesia's maritime doctrine under Jokowi, Indonesia-centric connectivity, and NATO's role in contemporary European security. Key works include *Poros Maritim Dunia sebagai Pendekatan Strategi Maritim Indonesia* and *Kebutuhan Uni Eropa terhadap Institusi Keamanan: Peranan NATO di Era Kontemporer*.



**Siti Rokhmawati Susanto** is a Lecturer in International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga. Her academic interests span global environmental politics, maritime connectivity, and strategic partnerships in East Asia. Her scholarly work includes analyses of Greenpeace's strategic evolution, Indonesia's maritime infrastructure under President Jokowi, and the Indonesia–South Korea partnership in electric vehicle development. Among her most cited publications are *The Transformation of Greenpeace Strategy in the 1990s: From Civil Disobedience to Moderate Movement* and *Evaluating Four Years of Jokowi's Sea Toll Policy*.

**I Gede Wahyu Wicaksana** is a Lecturer in International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga. His expertise covers international security, Indonesia–U.S. relations, and the social dimensions of foreign policy. He has published extensively in reputable international journals, including *The Pacific Review*, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, and *Asian Journal of Political Science*. His recent works include *Economic Nationalism for Political Legitimacy in Indonesia* and *Indonesia's Maritime Connectivity Development: Domestic and International Challenges*.

**Nadya Afdholy** is a Lecturer in the Master's Program in Literary and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga. Her academic specialization includes contemporary literature, gender and media studies, and critical discourse analysis. Her works have explored topics ranging from urban consumer behavior and poetic literacy in the digital age to ideological critique in news media and representations of masculinity in film. She is the author of several cited publications, including *Perilaku Konsumsi Masyarakat Urban Pada Produk Kopi Ala Starbucks* and *Model SAVIREDU: Inovasi Membaca Puisi di Era Digimodernisme*.