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Geopolitics, Real and Imagined Spaces: China and Foreign Policy in the Context of East Asia

Daniel Lemus ***Delgado**** *and José Jesús Bravo* ***Vergara*****
Asia Pacific Center, Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico
Pacific Studies Department, Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between the People's Republic of China in East Asia and real and imagined spaces as key factors for understanding the rise of China on the international stage. To this end therefore we propose that spaces, both real and imagined, play a fundamental role in the design and implementation of Chinese foreign policy. We propose that Chinese interests in East Asia are the result of both material and intangible aspirations, which in turn are the result of a dynamic and intersubjective processes between the physical and imaginary worlds. In this world both physical and imagined geography have a fundamental role. Finally, we conclude that the international system is a world comprising not only physical but also mental representations which give form and meaning to the physical entity, as demonstrated by Chinese foreign policy in East Asia.

Keywords: *People's Republic of China, East Asia, foreign policy, geopolitics, imagined spaces*

1. Introduction

East Asia is one of the most dynamic regions on earth. In this space countries such as the People's Republic of China,[1] Japan, Russia and South Korea are the largest economies, although the United States also has an undeniably significant presence in the region. East Asia also hosts the important nuclear powers (China, Russia and the U.S.), with the danger that North Korea at some point might become the fourth nuclear power in the region, despite its significantly smaller economic capacity.

The international relations of the states in the region are marked by a series of conflicts derived from the constant inter-state clash of interests between these nations and the United States. Territorial disputes such as

those arising between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu, Japanese protests to Russia over the Kuril Islands, the continuing state of war which exists between North and South Korea, and the Chinese insistence of sovereignty over Taiwan are just some examples of this reality. For its part, the United States has been a significant regional player for over a century. In effect, even though it is not an East Asian country, the global reach of US power has assisted in the establishing of a status quo which favours US interests. As the world's second-largest economy, China is set to gradually shape and reconstruct the international order (Zheng and Lim, 2017). What we actually see today is the increasing significance that China has attached to its interests in the region as a result of its foreign policy agenda, although on occasion these interests inevitably clash with those of the United States.[2]

Different perspectives evidence the competition between China and the United States in East Asia. For example, North Korean provocations emerged as a result of the post Cold War era Sino-US strategic competition in the region, where such variables as the rise of China, the increasing US focus on Asia and growing Sino-ROK economic ties are driving the strategic choices of major states (Kim, 2015). Regarding security, the United States is seeking to increasingly isolate China, by striking regional alliances, off-shore balancing, and shifting towards air-sea confrontations. In terms of trade, the United Sates continues its effort to reduce Asian mercantilism by tying Asian traders to neoliberal rule sets. Despite this however, the "Beijing Consensus" is a growing challenge to US soft power (Kelly, 2014), with China starting to affirm its military power in East and Southeast Asia. For example, a two-week standoff between Japan and China over a boat collision in 2010 underlined the growing propensity of China to adopt a more aggressive political approach against rivals and US allies. This incident happened near a chain of islands in the East China Sea, and Chinese claims of ownership of the archipelago and that the South China Sea was a "core interest", increased fears in Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries perceive that China is seeking to dominate a vital space in the region (Pant, 2012).

It should also be taken into account that sovereignty, along with territorial integrity and national unity, are indisputable values of identity to the Chinese nation-state (Xinbo, 2012; Khong, 2013). In addition, they are a fundamental part of the development of Chinese international relations (Kang, 2007: 81). With this vision, the Beijing regime believes that it needs to safeguard at all costs what it considers its territorial integrity and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and by doing so, strengthen the existence of the Chinese state (Xinbo, 2012).[3]

Chinese-U.S. rivalry also affects both multilateral and mini-lateral regional institutions in East Asia. China believes the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3 to be a primary vehicle for the consolidation of cooperation in East Asia, while maintaining a broader vision of a regional institution, the East Asia Summit (EAS), as a forum for talks. A similar scenario is present in the trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and Korea versus Korea, Japan and the U.S. Finally, regarding the economic panorama, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is another element of Chinese-U.S. competition (Park, 2013).

Lanteigne (2016) argued that China´s foreign policy is comprised of two processes. First, China is a rising power with a strong position that determines its actions and decisions in the international arena. Second, its foreign policy is in a stage of transformation and reconstruction. Nowadays China is a nation with significant aspirations of power (Li, 2009), and although the specific interests and approach vary according to geographic region, in the end, China's main focus is the search to contribute to constructing a multipolar world in order to reaffirm political stability and ensure the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Saunders, 2014b). The core of this strategy is actually to obtain prominence in East Asia (Zhao, 2014).

Given this complex situation, this article analyzes the relationship between physical and imagined spaces and how external politics reflects the aspirations of states to consolidate their interests. To this end, we examine the interests of China in East Asia from the classic geopolitical standpoint and complement this analysis with an approximation of these imaginary spaces. We propose that both real and imaginary spaces are fundamental to Chinese foreign policy. The central proposition is that the focus of classic geopolitics is insufficient to allow understanding of the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in the region; it is necessary therefore to complement this vision with an approximation that considers the paradigmatic concepts of an imaginary space which determines the place that each one of the actors occupies within it. This paradigmatic concept has its roots in a particular interpretation of Chinese history and civilization.

Thus, we suggest that to understand Chinese foreign policy in East Asia it is necessary to consider the geographical factor from two dimensions. The first is the classic vision of geopolitics in which physical space is relevant to Chinese interests.

The second aspect considers an imaginary space. This idealized space encourages the aspirations of the Chinese bureaucratic elite to recreate a world based on certain historical paradigmatic concepts.[4] In this way, this article contributes to understanding the rise of China in East Asia from a perspective which not only considers geography as a power-defining factor but which goes further than the classic vision of geopolitics in highlighting the relevance of ideational structure in the process. Using a paraphrase from Alexander Wendt

(1992), space is what states make of it. In other words, space is given not only by nature but socially constructed.

This article has six sections. In the next section, we introduce the emergence of geopolitics and the major theoretical proposals utilized to understand how state interests in the international arena have their origin in distinct geographic spaces. In the third section, we show how physical space is a factor which determines the interests of China. In the fourth section, we analyze the paradigmatic concept of space inherent in classic Chinese civilization, and we explore the impact of this idea on the perception of China as the centre of the world to the contemporary political elite. In the next section, we present the rise of China and what this signifies for the East Asian region. Finally, in the conclusion we discuss how it is that both material and imaginary factors have come to be the two elements which allow us to understand the current rise of China and its impact in East Asia.

2. Geopolitics and the Quest for Power

Geopolitics encompasses the study of the exterior spatial relationships of states, and refers particularly to the geographical aspects of these external relations and the problems of particular states which impact the rest of the world (Cairo, 1993). According to Robert Kaplan, geography plays a central role in the relationships of each nation-state, as it governs the way in which the individual challenges which arise are tackled and thus affects outcomes. Natural characteristics such as rivers, seas, hills, mountains as well as climatic differences mark both culture and ideology and also the way in which historical challenges are confronted (Kaplan, 2012). For example, ideas about control of oceans have always played a fundamental role in politics, diplomacy, and the military, and in part explain the current disputes in the South China Sea (Ren and Liu, 2013).

Rudolf Kjellen, who is believed to have coined the term "geopolitics", understood the concept as the link between the geographical and the political (Tuathail, 1998). In his key work *The State as a Life-Form*, Kjellen signalled that the state could be considered as an individual human, as it was subject to the law of natural growth. That is to say, as a living organism it is born, grows, develops and dies, although in some cases it simply transforms. In the same way, Kjellen argued that the two principal influences on the state are geographic environment and race (Rosales, 2015).

Halford Makinder (1904) reaffirmed the relevance of geopolitics by highlighting the existence of the significant influence of geographical conditions on human activity and how these influences are regarded by humans. Mackinder developed his theories during the heyday of the British Empire. His most significant contribution was the *Heartland* theory, and he identified Eurasia,

more specifically Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as a "pivotal region" of the world, a huge landmass inaccessible to maritime powers, but with sufficient riches to allow the country which controlled this area to dominate the world.

Geopolitics as a discipline was enriched thanks to the contributions of diverse theories influenced to a large extent by military strategy and by the identification of the importance of resources to the objectives of survival and dominance. The most outstanding of these theorists included, amongst others, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Karl Haushofer and Nicholas Spykman. In the case of Mahan, his time in the navy led to him concentrating his geopolitical vision on the relevance of maritime power. He was the first author to recognize the importance of maritime dominance on the history of humanity. The effect of his work *The Influence of Naval Power in History* urged the most important leaders of the time to produce battleships and establish bases which would give them key points of control to protect trade routes and strengthen outlying military outposts (Cropsey and Milikh, 2012).

For his part, Karl Haushofer concentrated on the relationship between access to and possession of resources and the significance of this relationship to the survival of the "great nations" (Haushofer, 2009). He indicated that politicians should not only have an understanding of jurisprudence and political science, but an understanding of geopolitics was also essential, an idea which, according to his viewpoint, was particularly important for Germany, his native country. The central theory of this argument was that space was the defining element which ruled the history of humanity:

> Only a nation with sufficient space is capable of providing both spiritual and material necessities. Our leaders must learn to use the tools available to continue the fight for the existence of Germany, a fight which is becoming increasingly difficult due to the mismatch between food production and population density (Haushofer, 2009).

According to Augusto Rattenbach (1975), Haushofer affirmed that geography will become the defining factor in world politics and was therefore of particular importance to the analysis of the distribution of available living space: in other words, the space required for nations to feed their respective populations. He also mentioned the importance of complete integration of geographical space (Haushofer, 2009). In this sense, Haushofer alluded to the consideration of geographical space as a transcendent political and economic factor, but also as an element of great importance militarily. Kaplan (2012) subsequently argued that geography is a constant impulse behind the development of nation-state actions, particularly with reference to the military and economic areas.

Finally, Nicholas Spykman, influenced by both Mackinder and Mahan, proposed a scenario in which geography was identified as the most important

factor in the formulation of state foreign policy, due to its status as the most permanent identifying element (Cairo, 1993). Spykman's theory put forward the objectives that he argued should guide US foreign policy both during and after the Second World War (WWII). His theory was based on the premise that as the US had insufficient resources to compete with the combined resources of Eurasia, it therefore had to ensure a balance of power in both Europe and Asia. The danger was that the German-Japanese alliance could be continued after the end of the war by countries such as China and Russia (Dougherty and Pzaltzgraff, 2001).

Spykman referenced Mahan's ideas relating to the importance of maritime power and used the theories of Mackinder as part of his own proposal in the same way, emphasizing the importance of maritime strength over terrestrial power. It may well be argued that Mackinder created a model based on European history, believing that the state that occupied the *Heartland* would enjoy decision-making power over world politics, while Spykman, without gainsaying the relevance of the *Heartland* in obtaining world power, argued that in actuality the control of the "continental rim" or *Rimland* (Spykman, 2008) was actually of more relevance for states.

From this standpoint it was essential for the United States to acquire, as much for peacetime as for wartime, a global strategy based on the implications of geographical location, this considering that the US was in fact a considerable maritime power and that its intervention in WWII resulted from a desire to avoid the appearance of a dominant power in the *Rimland* surrounding Eurasia (Peritone, 2010). In this way *Rimland* was considered a perspective of particular relevance in the development of US foreign policy post-WWII.

To conclude, according to the perspective of the classic authors of geopolitics, the development of the great powers has been determined by the relevance of the relationship existing between the geographic factors which surround them and the deployment of their foreign policy. Nevertheless, according to Tuathail (1996), these approximations are constrained by the fact that in the search for specialization a Eurocentric view of understanding the relationship between power and states is the norm. He furthermore maintains that this view of the existence of important regions, identities and perspectives is the natural one. In this way, geopolitics in its classic dimension has justified state expansionism and militarism, and left to one side the fact that these processes are marked by specific social and historical contexts.

The theoretical review of the most critical approach to understanding the relationship between geography and foreign policy shows how ideas about the values of space has changed over time, with the significance of physical space and the conceptual framing of physical elements determining perceptions of geography. This perception generates the practices, norms and discourse of

how a nation should conduct foreign policy. The evolution of various theories of geopolitics reflects that the importance of particular space is shaped by many forces of the international system in a specific historical context. At the same time, the concept of space is a continuous construction of meanings that influences the norms of how both real and imaginary space are perceived. Geopolitics therefore is the result of how a singular way of thinking embeds into civilization.

It can be seen therefore how the traditional vision of geopolitics corresponds to a Western perspective. However, it is possible to find other ways in which the relationship between physical space and international politics can be understood. As John Agnew (2012) suggests, nowadays the way of thinking about China's "place in the world" is based on the use of analogies and interpretations of how China's past practices and geographical forms inspire contemporary and future directions in Chinese foreign policy. Different venues within China are therefore producing interpretive geopolitical frames to assist in the conduct of foreign policy. Within these narratives, it is possible to distinguish four distinct strands of thought: Pacific Rim, orientalism, nationalist geopolitics, and international relations with Chinese characteristics, with each strand placing a different emphasis on Chinese history. However, these interpretations about space as a historical and social construct have their roots in real, physical space. In the following section we analyze the physical space that frames the possibilities for Chinese action on the international stage.

3. Physical Space and Chinese Interests

Firstly it is necessary to state that geographical space plays a defining role in Chinese foreign policy for diverse reasons. In the first place, when one thinks of China one also considers its not insignificant territory. China is a nation with an area of approximately 9,500,000 square kilometres and a population of over 1,360 million people. China shares over 20 thousand kilometres of land border with 14 countries: North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam (Anguiano, 2008). Within this immense territory are four distinctly different forms of political administration. It has 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities administrated directly by the Communist Party and 2 special administrative regions. In terms of population, China recognizes 55 different ethnic minorities, which comprise approximately 6-8% of the total population. The dominant ethnic group, the Han, actually have significant regional linguistic variations, but the existence of a written language since the second century B.C.E. has been a culturally unifying factor in the midst of this diversity (Starr, 2010).

Secondly we find the urgent need for economic development. From the inception of the reform program, the Chinese economy has grown at an average rate of 9.8% annually for over three decades (Song, 2013). The current imperative for China remains as it was at the beginning of the reform program: guaranteeing economic growth with the intention of improving the life chances of its citizens. Nevertheless, the fallout from the economic crisis of 2008 has forced China to revise its growth forecast downwards and impose a "new normal" where the aspiration was moderate and balanced growth. In spite of the adverse circumstances presented by the international context and the need for balanced and more environment-friendly growth, economic success continues to be an imperative for the Chinese state. It should not be forgotten that growth increases the legitimacy of the regime, and, simultaneously, contains all the elements for possible social unrest resulting from the social inequality that, paradoxically, this growth has generated.

The third factor refers to the Chinese geopolitical context. As Anguiano (2008) has argued, due to its contiguous coastline and military reach China has important links with the great archipelagos of the region. It is in this vast theatre that China's relations with Japan, a developed-world economic and technological power, take place. It is also the environment in which it maintains relations with the following nations: Australia and New Zealand, countries viewed as advanced economies; Russia, a nuclear and military power; India, a rising power, and the countries of South-East Asia which make up the Association of South-East Asian Nations. China has similarly played a fundamental part in the complex relationship between the two Koreas. This geopolitical context delineates the foreign policy decisions implemented by the bureaucratic elite.

From the perspective of geopolitics the rise of China can be identified as a natural result of the search for an area of influence which will provide the resources necessary to continue its heady economic rise and guarantee a natural security buffer. This buffer corresponds to the territorial reach of the Chinese state. For this reason, the Chinese government has directed a great deal of attention towards gaining access to control of its immediate geographic space, and deployed significant resources to begin ensuring such control.

Nevertheless, without downplaying the influence of space in Chinese foreign policy, it is necessary to consider that this vision is in fact incomplete and that it is necessary to take a broader view which also considers the imaginary aspects of space. In this sense, as the previous section has demonstrated, the beliefs of the current Chinese bureaucratic elite about what the nation should be are based on an imaginary concept of space derived from a particular interpretation of Chinese civilization and the tax system. These ideas about the centrality of China are in fact widely shared by other countries in the region (Kang, 2003).

4. Imagined Space: A World View According to the Heritage of Classical Chinese Civilization

Evidently, the manner in which bureaucratic elites decided and implemented the foreign policy of a state was conditioned by the material structures of the international scene and by the individual abilities of each state to implement its foreign policy. However, the perception that these elites had of the international scene was of equal importance. This perception encompassed beliefs about values and norms as well as behavioral expectations that each state and other actors on the international scene should assume (Onuf, 1998). In the same way these perceptions were based on a particular understanding of history and of the identities that each international player possessed, given that state identity in large part determined state interests (Epstein, 2013). These perceptions are the lens through which international reality is seen and they act in accordance with the understanding which colours this reality (Onuf, 1998).

The case of China is no exception. The foreign policy which the political elite has followed over the last six decades has been related to both tangible and intangible factors. Different events in foreign policy have been moulded not only by the physical space occupied by China, but also by the particular vision of an imagined space. This suggests that the space China is desirous of occupying in the world corresponds to an interpretation that the bureaucratic elite has constructed about the past. At the same time, this interpretation has constituted a fundamental part of the identity of the Chinese state, and in this way, maybe as in no other case, the weight of history, imagined space and the identity of the Chinese people are particularly significant elements which help to explain foreign policy. It is also true, according to Barabantsev (2009), that Chinese international relations cannot be understood by simply projecting Chinese history onto the present, as the past is only one way to confirm an imagined identity that drives and guides the role that China must play in the international arena. In addition, there is the existence of a Chinese bureaucratic elite who perceive themselves as the heirs and custodians of Chinese civilization.

Out of this perception arises the classical vision of China as the centre of the world. It should not be forgotten that the international context in which we find ourselves today is the result of the Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648 (Kennedy, 1989). This agreement created the basis for the establishment of the modern international system. In this way fundamental elements of the relationship between states were established, elements such as the principles of territorial sovereignty, of not meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign nations and the equal treatment of states independent of their material capacities or religious beliefs. This treaty permitted an end to be put to the

religious wars that had plagued Europe in previous years. It is important to understand that this vision came out of the European context and was judged to be the best way of organizing interstate relations: it was gradually expanded across the globe along with European imperialism in the same way as the capitalist system (Wallerstein, 2004).

The world vision described above however contrasted significantly with the Sinocentric view. In his seminal work John King Fairbank put forward the "Chinese world order" theory, with the intention of understanding the nature of Chinese imperial relations. Fairbanks' thesis postulated a "Sino-centric hierarchical world order", in which China had a lord-vassal relationship in vertical terms with neighbouring political units. According to Fairbank, this relationship functioned as part of a tribute system. In East Asia it was this system which would mould international relations before the arrival of western powers. Fairbank argued that the tribute system permitted the direction of diplomatic and commercial matters between foreign governments and the Chinese Emperor. In sum, the Chinese Emperor awarded both official titles and influence to neighbouring governments, thus giving them a form of legitimacy. In exchange, these foreign powers adopted a submissive position, thus confirming the superiority of Chinese civilization and legitimacy of the Chinese Emperor (Fairbank, 1969). Imperial China was therefore governed by a unified system of rituals that promoted the ideology of Great Unity (Callahan, 2010).

In effect, in the 16th century Chinese governments considered, without the slightest doubt, that China possessed the biggest political structure and was, in effect, the centre of the world. China was a universe unto and in itself. In this context, the Confucian approach was the paradigm of the world (Levenson, 1971), which was protected by natural frontiers in which Chinese influence spread to Korea, Japan, the Ryukyu islands and Southeast Asia. In this autonomous world of East Asia, China was the only power (McNall, 1971), and in this scenario the relationship between states was asymmetrical and notable for its benevolent nature: "the dominant state is essentially benign, the smaller state would prefer an accommodating stance that allows it to benefit from warm relations with its neighbor" (Kang, 2007: 19).

This vision paradigmatically dominated the relationship between the Chinese empire and neighbouring states. The relationship between China and its neighbours which resulted from this paradigm had been in place for over two thousand years when the Europeans forced China to open to the world in the 19th century (Fairbank, 1969). The imposition, by blood and fire, of a western inter-state structure was one reason which explained the situation of weakness, backwardness and poverty in which China was mired in the middle of the twentieth century. Mao Zedong expressed it thusly in the founding discourse of the Communist Republic: "The Chinese have always been a

powerful and hardworking nation and only in recent times have we fallen behind. This delay is exclusively due to the oppression and exploitation of foreign imperialists and of the reactionary government of the country" (Mao in Cornejo, 2010: 300-301).

The Sinocentric world vision represented the most noteworthy, consistent, and important dimension of the imperial discourse (Zhang, 2011), as it was based on Chinese imperial history. The first element is the idea of China as a Central Kingdom (Zhang, 2013). In actuality the name of China in the Chinese language is Zhōngguó 中国, derived from *guó* "kingdom" and *zhōng*, "central" or "in the middle of". From the Chinese point of view, relations between states take place in an ordered and hierarchical world, in which each state must assume a specific and appropriate role according to the position that it occupies in the hierarchy and in relationships. In this way, Chinese leaders ascertained that China occupied a unique position in the historical and geographical context due to its hierarchical vision of the world and evaluation of itself as the Central Kingdom (Reed, 2006).

The Chinese Empire was established in the year 221 BCE, when the state of Qin unified the Chinese world following years of intense interstate warfare (Gernet, 1996). Along with the empire was established a monarchical political system, a powerful bureaucracy, a strongly hierarchical social structure alongside considerable and generalized social mobility, an extended-family system, a uniform system of writing and the idea of education as a route to achieving power (Lewis, 2010). Despite the differences present at distinct stages of the Chinese dynastic age, all these characteristics continued to be valid as much for the unifying dynasties as for regional regimes during periods of political fragmentation. Similarly these characteristics were present in dynasties headed by ethnic Chinese as well as those founded by different ethnic groups such as the Mongols or the Manchu. In this concept of power the Emperor is regarded as omnipotent, with his law being universal. The bureaucracy must be in the hands of men of proven talent and merit. The common people must be well treated but must remain outside the sphere of political influence. These ideas marked the conduct of those who governed China for centuries (Pines, 2012).

As Pines (2012) has maintained, the Chinese Empire was an extraordinarily powerful ideological construction. In other words, the particular historical trajectory of the Chinese Empire has not been one of indestructibility, in fact it has suffered various collapses throughout its trajectory. What is singular about Chinese history is its repeated resurgences. These occur in the same general geographical vicinity and give rise to a similar functional structure to those seen in previous periods prior to dynastic collapse. It is worthy of note that these resurgences were not casual; on the contrary, they reflect the conscious efforts of the principal political actors to restore what

they considered to be the natural world order, that which was normal and must be the normative standard of sociopolitical conduct: the imperial order.

It could be argued that the most important element of this world view in Ancient China was the unanimous agreement between different schools of philosophy that Chinese political unification was the only way to put an end to the state of perennial warfare (Pines, 2012). In the same way, it was considered that Chinese territory, known as Tiānxià 天下 – "all-under-heaven" – should be ruled by one, all-powerful monarch (Kang, 2003). These premises of unity and a sole political authority became the ideological basis of the empire and remained unquestioned for centuries. The basic ideological premise of the imperial structure was shared by all politically-significant social groups, including immediate neighbours. No other alternative political structure was considered either legitimate or appropriate (Pines, 2012). In addition, imperial China utilized a specific ideology based on the Tiānxià concept that attracted rather than conquered its neighbours (Callahan, 2010).

In its most basic sense, Tiānxià is a geographical term (Callahan, 2008), with the concept being created during the Zhou dynasty, approximately 3,000 years ago. According to Zhao (2009), the Zhou concept of "all-under-heaven" had different elements. First, it was a monarchal system, including certain aristocratic components. Second, it was an open network, consisting of a general world government and sub-states. Third, the world government was in charge of universal institutions, laws and world order; however, the world government lost its legitimacy if it betrayed justice or abused its responsibilities, and revolution is then justified. Four, the sub-states were independent in their domestic economy, culture, social norms and values. Five, an institutionally-established balance played a key role in maintaining long-term cooperation. Finally, people had the freedom to migrate and work in any state. This was crucial because it implied a non-nationalistic philosophy: "The system, characterized by its global perspective and the principle of harmony amongst all nations, created long-term peace which lasted for centuries in China, thought to be the whole world as a result of the limited geographical knowledge at that time" (Zhao, 2009: 9).

The Zhou dynasty inherited a vision of Tiānxià as a timeless, three-dimensional way of governing. One is these dimensions was the material and geographical area, and in this sense, it is almost equivalent to 'the universe' or 'the world' in western language. However, Tiānxià also has two other significant meanings. It alludes to all people, the people's heart (*minxin* 民心), the people's will. Tiānxià is also seen as the world institution (Zhao, 2005), constituting the Chinese pre-modern cosmological view of the world, a view significantly different from the world order created by the European civilization (Barabantsev, 2009). Tiānxià was a powerful idea that encompassed the civilized world blessed by Heaven and presided over by the

Chinese emperor: "No political control was involved. It was later invoked to refer to imperial lands but it could also be used with different ideas about territory governed by non-Chinese rulers, like those in Vietnam, Korea and Japan, for the purposes of the empire (Wang, 2013: 14)

Given these suppositions, it was believed therefore that China was the only civilized country in the world. The rest of the world was land dominated by barbarians, an uncivilized place (Terrill, 2003). In consequence, the further away people were from the political and cultural boundaries of China the further away they were from civilization. This overarching paradigm of the centrality of China therefore formed the basis of the beliefs upon which the relationships between China and other states in East Asia were founded. The main reason for Chinese superiority lay in its moral superiority, in virtue, from which material superiority originated. The supreme values of Chinese civilization guaranteed the supremacy of the Chinese state in every respect (Pines, 2012).

The primary belief was that the traditional world was hierarchical and not egalitarian. The concept of legal equality or individual political sovereignty was non-existent. All political entities were arranged in accordance with the centrality of China. All forms of what today are referred to as international relations, including political, cultural and economic relations had their place within the framework of the taxation system. This taxation system was divided into two parts: those who paid and those who received. This system permitted the legalization of long-distance commerce and preserved the myth of the self-sufficiency of the Chinese civilization (Pines, 2012).

The centrality of China to the international order was due to its civilization and its virtue, particularly the virtue of the ruler. From this perspective, world order was much more an ethical phenomenon than a political one. Harmony on the international scenario, as well as the harmony present inside China itself, was more than anything a product of the virtue of the emperor. This virtue was apparent in the capacity to preserve Confucian values (Pines, 2012).

This hierarchical world was considered a universal world. No other hierarchies existed. Nor was it possible to conceive of other sources of power. As a result, there was no need to consider other concepts, such as a power equilibrium. State power therefore was seen as a reflection of virtue. By definition power was primarily more moral than material, because it resulted from the possession of virtue. In this way duty and power were regarded as synonymous (Kang, 2010).

International society was understood as an extension of internal society. Concepts such as "nation-state", "international" or "interstate" were unknown, nor did clear boundaries exist between jurisdiction and power. The only apparent limits were solely the result of culture. An example would be the

construction of the Great Wall of China, which actually resulted from the need to mark limits between nomads and barbaric northern peoples and the agricultural and bureaucratic society of China. The Great Wall was never about a political or jurisdictional frontier (Kang, 2010).

In this context therefore the inability of Chinese monarchs to understand the ideas of a western international scene built on state sovereignty as the basic element of equality between nations was hardly surprising. A perfect example would be the case of George McCartney, who was appointed by the British government to facilitate commerce between Britain and China and establish a permanent base in Beijing to further diplomatic relations based on western concepts, an idea which seemed ridiculous to the then Chinese Emperor, Qianlong. The Emperor sent a missive to King George III which stated that "if you assert that your reverence for Our Celestial dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilization, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that, even if your Envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilization, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore, however adept the Envoy might become, nothing would be gained thereby" (Qianlong in Bonhomme and Boivin, 2009: 833). In fact, as Lin (2009) suggests, in the case of the Hunza tribal state of Central Asia, it is possible that the tax system was not a dynastic inheritance which ceased to function after the 1911 revolution, but rather an instrument of political convenience which continued to be used in the post-imperial era.

The theoretical conceptualization of the taxation system should however be viewed with caution due to the danger of over-simplification: this may occur in the absence of specific contexts when there is a failure to consider the specific nuances of how a relationship is presented within differing geographical and historical scenarios (Crossley, 1997). Kim (2002) argues that the preconceived image of the international order in East Asia is problematic due to representations of the "other" – as much for western foreigners as for Asians, which are based on generalizations and fundamental misunderstandings about specific interpretations of Confucian thought which do not accurately reflect the essence of the system. Nevertheless, the power of the idea lies not in whether it coincides fully with reality, but rather in whether the interpretation justifies the design of a very specific Chinese foreign policy.

The perception of China as the centre of the world is important because it has constituted a reference point from which the governmental elite has defined the role of the nation in the global sphere. Thus, as highlighted by Romer Cornejo (2010), the foundation of the People's Republic foreign policy for the Chinese has been defined by the search for a space which reflects their ideas about the achievements of their civilization prior to the 19th century. It is the search for this space based on an aspirational ideal

which has moulded Chinese foreign policy from the establishment of the People's Republic. In fact, for the Chinese political bureaucracy, the rise of China on the international scene is simply the recuperation of the privileged position that China has enjoyed throughout history. The period of humiliation and under-development of the last two centuries is no more than a historical anomaly that produced a traumatic experience, one which Chinese officials must correct. Chinese leaders therefore assume not only the need to protect their territorial integrity, but also their sovereignty and their national unity as values of their identity as a nation-state (Xinbo, 2012). In addition, they have historically paid special attention to seeing China increasingly as a great ascendant power of the twenty-first century in a way that assumes a more global perspective (Wang Yi in Byun, 2017). This is exemplified through assumption of greater global responsibilities and the promotion by Beijing of new proposals for world order (Stone, 2017).

Obviously, the world and the international system is not and could not be the same as that of imperial China. However, the imagination and idealization of a past where China occupied a prominent site is an attractive idea that foments a particular way of understanding the leadership of China in the twenty-first century. The bureaucratic elite has viewed this past in two ways. First, in the creation of a particular narrative that shows the benefits of a hierarchical international system and the traditional positive values of Chinese civilization. Second, in the employment of the narrative to argue that Chinese power in the international arena is distinct due to the way it relates to its neighbours and the principle of mutual benefit. Today, this idea of the past is incarnate in the discourse and practice of foreign policy.[5] In the following section, we analyze how physical and imaginary space influences the design and practice of foreign policy in East Asia.

5. East Asia, the Rise of China and the Role of Space

China's presence is undoubtedly expanding globally, and its capacity to mould the international scene in accordance with its own interest demands a new balance of power (Saunders, 2014a). The formula for this increasing Chinese influence is simple, and involves a combination of commerce and investment. To this can be added loans to the governments of developing nations, principally to assist in the development of infrastructure. In these cases, the type of loan offered is notable for not being conditional on the internal affairs of national governments. In this way, questions related to human rights, transparency in the use of resources and the fight against corruption, demands which are inextricably linked to loans from organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are not taken into consideration by Beijing (Woods, 2008). The formula behind the growing

Chinese presence on the international scene is complemented by a strong media campaign which is linked to the promotion of the Chinese language and the granting of scholarships for study in the country (Hartig, 2012). In sum, the motivation behind all these actions is the strengthening of Chinese presence on the international scene.

East Asia however is particularly unusual because the formula for economic assistance is unconditional and this development cooperation does not necessarily fit the individual dynamics of the countries in this geographical zone. One reason for this is that the perception of space in East Asia is very important, and therefore the siren-song that China represents in other parts of the world does not sound so enchanting in this particular region.

From this perspective, China is not an attractive proposition for traditional partners in the region, particularly the United States. The formula that the Chinese government utilizes on the other side of the world can be perceived as hollow in East Asia. In many aspects, the growing presence of China, bolstered by military spending, is perceived as a security threat by South Korea, Japan and Taiwan as well as Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam and the Philippines (Chen and Feffer, 2009).

The reason behind the growing Chinese presence is due to the strategic vision of the Chinese authorities. The government has displayed a more active diplomatic policy with the intention of moulding the international scene according to its interests. The rise of China is not a minor issue. This situation goes further than just a modification of the relationship with neighbouring countries: it implies a simultaneous displacement of the United States as the principal actor in this part of the world.

As Yoshihide Soeya (2015) argued, this aspiration does not necessarily imply that China wishes to compete with the United States over Asian or indeed word leadership. For Chinese leaders, as President Xi Jinping has said, the Pacific Ocean is large enough to accommodate both China and the US. Nevertheless, the Chinese bureaucratic elite is not in agreement with the dominant role of the US in East Asia and would like to see the eventual retreat of the US from this part of the world. The concept of a new model in Chinese relations demonstrates this fact. This model, on one hand, acknowledges the existence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific and the world stage, and on the other visualizes a scenario where the US leaves the fate of this part of the world in Chinese hands. In this new vision of international relations, Beijing aspires to solidify the dream of this part of the world being centred on China. In this way what we see in East Asia is the reconfiguration of the core questions of the international scene through the growth of a new balance of power. Although this readjustment is taking place in a particular geographical region, the implications are global.

Until now this change has taken place gradually and, with a few exceptions, without significant setbacks. Evidently, however, tension is building between China and some of its neighbours in East and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, in general terms, this is a gradual transition which has been accompanied by strong economic ties between the countries in the region which has softened the impact of these changes. Nevertheless, one question posited by international relations is whether or not the growth and decline of hegemonic powers can take place peacefully. History teaches us that it has not always been so, but neither does it determine which historical phenomena will or will not be repeated in the present.

As Beeson and Li (2015) have highlighted, the US and China are not only the two great economic powers on the planet but at the same time, they symbolize, arguably, the two most strategic actors in the design and implementation of foreign policy. Although the physical capacities and investments in military spending made by the Chinese government differ significantly from those of the US, the growing activism of China on the international scene and its understanding of the meaning of national security impact significantly the relationship with both China's neighbours and the US. In this way the rise of China represents simultaneously an unprecedented transformation in world economic structures and a direct challenge to US supremacy. In sum, US-China relations reveal two parallel but equally important processes: the transformation of the structures of the international system and, within these structures, the distribution of power between the diverse actors.

Given the above context, Chinese foreign policy reflects a strong impulse to establish a regional order centred on China in East Asia. In order to help achieve this, President Xi Jiping, speaking at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in Shanghai in May 2014 stated: "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation" (Xi Jiping, 2014a). In addition, he suggested that: "Matters in Asia ultimately must be taken care of by Asians, Asia's problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians, and Asia's security ultimately must be protected by Asians". That same year, in the APEC summit hosted by China in Beijing, President Xi suggested that the region should work towards realizing an "Asia-Pacific dream", based on the shared destiny of all the countries in the region, and adding that China would be in a position to provide "new initiatives and visions for enhancing regional cooperation" (Xi Jiping, 2014b).[6]

Arguably the best example in East Asia of how the new foreign policy direction under Xi Jinping is based on the desire to establish a new order is

the case of the South China Sea (SCS). Since 2010 the conflict in the SCS has become more volatile in the context of China's accelerated rise and the US "pivot" towards Asia (Fangyin, 2016). This conflict shows the rivalry between China, the USA, and other ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam (Roszko, 2015). The dispute between China and the USA in this region results not only from the competition for local energy resources but also for its value as a strategic path, particularly the Malacca Strait (Wang, 2006). Control of the Strait is viewed as essential to the launch of China as a great naval power (Karim, 2013), and it is for this reason that Chinese tactics to impose its interests in the SCS include the use of a historical narrative to demonstrate the legitimacy of its demands. The intentions behind the establishing of such a narrative are threefold: to take a bilateral approach to the countries of the region, to drive a wedge between ASEAN and the USA, and to strengthen naval capabilities in order to resolve the territorial dispute according to Chinese interests (Cruz De Castro, 2012).

6. Conclusions

Space plays a fundamental role in the process of transforming Chinese foreign policy. However, this space has two dimensions: real and imaginary. We consider that both spaces are fundamental for the analysis of Chinese foreign policy. In this way, it can be understood that it is not only material factors which govern Chinese actions on the international stage but that the ideas, values and intangible aspirations derived from an imagined concept of space have driven the foreign policy decisions of the government elite.

In the analysis of foreign policy, geopolitics is a perspective which permits the development of a wide-ranging and in-depth explanation of the relationship between countries. The approach to the struggle for resources, the development of ways to increase power and survival and the relationship between states based on the geography which drives geopolitics are all inextricably linked to the daily consideration that states have of recognition of their interests. Nevertheless, if we consider only those physical resources related to the traditional vision of geopolitics such as the power of geography and leave to one side the imagined representations of spaces, the vision is incomplete because it does not permit an evaluation of those material or imagined aspects which are fundamental to international relations, and it is these which, in fact, determine the interests of the states. The world is not only comprised of the physical environment but what we believe it to be intellectually. The interests of the actors on the international scene are not the result of a cold, objective and calculating way of seeing reality, but rather the sum of socially-constructed aspirations resulting from a perception of the spaces in which the imagination develops a fundamental role.

The case of Chinese foreign policy also shows us that throughout the existence of the People's Republic of China the actions taken abroad by the bureaucratic elite are a combination of tangible and intangible, in which ideas, perceptions and identities play a fundamental role. In other words we cannot limit the explanation of Chinese behaviour and the transformation of East Asia solely to exclusively material factors. In this way, when faced with an apparent contradiction relating to some of the actions taken in this region by the communist leadership which could be interpreted as contradictory or unsound, if we instead consider ideas and perceptions of the Chinese world based on an imaginary space where all is as it should be, it is easier to understand the rationale behind the foreign-policy decisions made by the Chinese elite.

The key question to be answered is how the combination of these mental and material structures can determine the reconfiguration of the international scene in the Asia-Pacific and what consequences this could have for the international community. A clear example would be territorial disputes, which revolve around the material interests and idealized aspirations of those involved. In actuality, these disputes are a recurring phenomenon in international relations and a constant cause of conflict between states (Cruz de Castro, 2013). Evidently, the manner in which China views these disputes is related to the material capacities which it has and the idealized aspirations which it pursues.

In this sense there is a clear sense of purpose towards China recovering the key position it once held in history. However, in order to achieve the fundamental proposition of recovering the central role of China on the international scene, an assertive policy must be imposed, sustained by multilateral initiatives and a spirit of cooperation based on the win-win principle; or, on the contrary, we may see a more jealous China, one less trusting and more aggressive when it comes to defending its interests. Which scenario actually takes place depends on the capacity of the international community to understand the reasoning behind Chinese foreign policy. China has shown a great deal of flexibility in the management of its foreign policy, and today participates in the principal regional and international organizations. The Chinese bureaucratic elite tends to view these organizations as a means of achieving or defending national interests while simultaneously exercising caution with regard to taking on costs, risks and international commitments (Saunders, 2014a).

Apparently the key to cementing the rise of Chinese power will depend on the leaders of western countries having the same degree of flexibility to enable them, without compromising their specific interests, to find common ground in the construction of a world big enough to encompass Chinese aspirations as well as the achievements of western powers. It is therefore

indispensable to understand the importance of physical and geographic space in the construction of Chinese interests.

Notes

* Daniel Lemus-Delgado PhD. is a member of the National Research System, Mexico (Level 1). He is the author of numerous articles covering issues related to Foreign Policy and International Development Cooperation on East Asia from a constructivist approach. His recent research projects focus on the relationship between identity and foreign policy in China. He can be reached at <dlemus@itesm.mx>.

** José Jesús Bravo Vergara PhD. is a candidate for membership of the Mexican National Research System. He has written several articles related to the identity of the United States and its hegemonic slope during recent administrations from a constructivist approach. His current research project is about political relations between the United States and China. He can be reached at < braverjoje@hotmail.com>.

1. It is necessary to distinguish between China as a political state and China as a civilization. Today, the People's Republic of China, founded after the triumph of the Communist revolution, includes ethnic groups that do not share the same values, traditions, beliefs and other elements of Chinese civilization. One example is the Muslims of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In addition, many Chinese people today do not live in a politically united China, although they are heirs of Chinese civilization. There are also Chinese diaspora in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and some cities in Canada and the United States. Finally, there is the case of Taiwan, an autonomous state with strong links to Chinese history and civilization but with a lower international recognition, limited participation in international organizations, and without representation at the United Nations.
2. As Lanteigne (2016) has observed, foreign policy can be understood as the interplay between various political agents – including individuals – and structures – the State, but also organizations and rules which are commonly constructed, i.e. formed by social relationships. In the case of China: "the biggest change in the development of that country's foreign policy has been the expansion both of the number of agents involved, directly or indirectly, in Beijing's foreign policymaker process, and the number of China's international interests as well as the global-level structures with which it can interact" (Lanteigne, 2016: 1).
3. In 2011, the then spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Hong Lei, pointed out that although his government has not explicitly outlined its territorial claims regarding the islands of the South China Sea, the current claims of Beijing are in fact based on the maps developed by the former Kuomintang government. This signifies that the territorial claim predates the founding of the People's Republic of China (Edward Wong, 14 June 2011).
4. According to Lanteigne (2016), to the extent that China is rising in the international arena, a number of actors, including sectors of the Chinese government but also non-state actors, participate in the design of foreign policy. However, in comparison with other nations, the decision-making process in foreign policy

is more centralized because the Chinese Communist Party is still the most important political actor. In addition, since President Xi took power, he has ended the traditional collective and consensual leadership structure, marginalized the bureaucracy and put himself at the centre (Blackwill and Campbell, 2016). Therefore, when we assume that one bureaucratic elite drives the international issues of the Chinese state, we refer to the political leadership of President Xi Jinping and his inner circle.

5. One example of the use of the past to design and justify Chinese foreign policy is the relationship between China and Africa in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Different meetings and action plans support the idea of mutual benefit, friendship and shared development being justified by an idealized view of China as an elder brother (Lemus, 2015).
6. The rise of China does not necessarily mean the origin of a new and unique hegemony, but also the consolidation of Chinese presence in multilateral mechanisms and in the construction of new mechanisms. This approach is observed in President Xi's defence of the current economic globalization model. Xi was quoted as saying at the 2016 APEC summit: "Since becoming an APEC member 25 years ago, China has forged ahead with other APEC members. Together, we have pursued development and shared prosperity. Together, we have advanced opening-up and deepened integration. Together, we have blazed new trails and taken bold initiatives. And together, we have pursued shared development based on mutual respect and assistance. Throughout these years, China and the economies in the Asia-Pacific have moved increasingly close to each other. Indeed, China has become a main trading partner and export market for most of the APEC members" (Xi Jiping, 2016). In a similar fashion China has gone on to boost new multilateral initiatives such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the One Belt One Road initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

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