

Institute of Chinese Studies

BOOK DISCUSSION

*Chinese Statecraft in a
Changing World:
Demystifying Enduring
Traditions and Dynamic
Constraints*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Author :

Jean Dong

18 September 2024

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Author: Ms. Jean Dong, Research Fellow, Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies, University of Melbourne; and, Visiting Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Moderator: Ms. Neha Bansal, Senior International Development Specialist; and, Founder, Asianism Retold

Date: 18 September 2024

Venue: Zoom

- The discussion on Jean Dong's book titled, *Chinese Statecraft in a Changing World: Demystifying Enduring Traditions and Dynamic Constraints* examined the evolving nature of China's foreign policy and its broader geopolitical implications. The session aimed to provide insights into China's motivations and strategies, offering perspectives on constructive engagement with the country.
- Ms. Neha Bansal highlighted China's rise, influenced by Western-funded development programmes post-1979, alongside its critical role in global institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). She traced the evolution of China's trade practices, contrasting its historical reluctance towards international trade during the Ming and Qing dynasties with its current global economic integration.
- The discussion introduced the book's central argument, drawing upon Henry Kissinger's insights from *On China*, particularly the question of whether crises leading to war stem from a nation's capabilities or conduct. The author referenced the Curl Memorandum of 1907, which suggests that strategic considerations should focus on a nation's capabilities rather than its behaviour — prompting a reassessment of how the world evaluates China's growing military power.

- Detailing the key arguments made in the book, Ms. Dong stated that viewing China primarily through the lens of its capabilities could undermine global trust in its leadership and alter international perceptions. At the same time, Beijing perceives a persistent Western bias against China, reinforcing insecurities that may be more concerning than its assertiveness. Furthermore, if China withdraws from global engagement, it may take decades to re-enter the international fold, with far-reaching geopolitical consequences.
- Ms. Dong traced historical patterns in Chinese statecraft, emphasizing its strategies for stability, security, and economic growth — shaped by geography and climate. She argued that China’s transition from a landlocked power to a maritime-oriented state was driven by internal migration and external threats during the Song dynasty. Concomitantly, China’s strategic culture blends Confucian ideals of harmony with pragmatic military doctrines from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, reflecting a dual approach of cooperative rhetoric and assertive geopolitical actions.
- The discussion underscored the need for a nuanced understanding of China’s geopolitical rise and its motivations. The author identified Africa as a potential area for India-China cooperation, particularly in renewable energy and trade. She also stated that India, as a trusted Western partner and a key member of QUAD, SCO, and BRICS, is well-positioned to play a balancing role in global geopolitics and engage with China on strategic issues.
- The book discussion emphasised that China’s evolving role in the international order requires a deeper understanding of its long-term strategies. India, leveraging its strategic partnerships and historical insights, has the potential to influence and mediate in global affairs, counterbalancing China’s rise while exploring avenues for constructive collaboration.

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