

Chinese politics & policy

'Dare to fight': Xi Jinping unveils China's new world order



The Chinese leader has inverted the 'hide and bide' doctrine in a bid to shape a global system around Beijing's interests

Joe Leahy in Beijing, **Kathrin Hille** in Taipei, **Andy Lin** in Hong Kong and **Michael Pooler** in São Paulo 14 HOURS AGO

With China's political class arrayed before him this month, Xi Jinping summed up his robust foreign policy to delegates with one vivid refrain: "dare to fight".

The declaration at the National People's Congress captured a new ethos for Beijing, spurred by the Chinese leader's conclusion that the US-led world order is now in decline and ready to be replaced with a system that better suits China's interests.

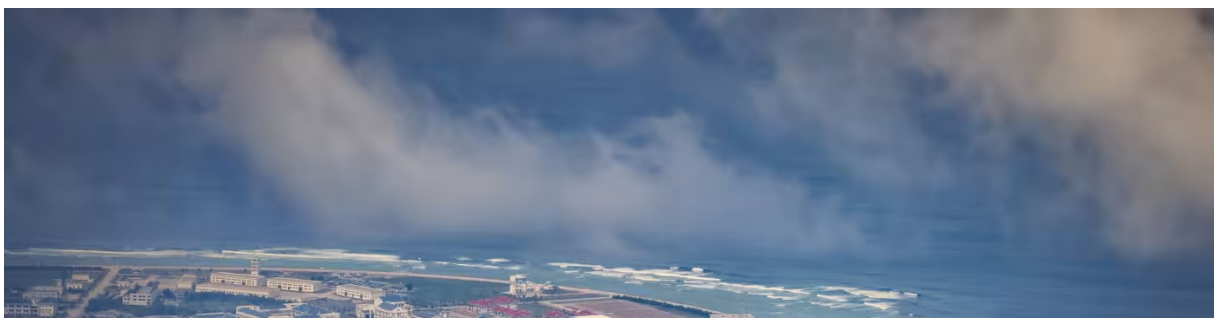
A flurry of diplomacy has already begun. Emerging from the self-isolation of China's zero-Covid policy, the president [conducted a state visit to Russia](#) this month, published a paper on peace in Ukraine and prepared to receive visits from European leaders eager for his help to end the war. Also this month China convinced [Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations](#), its first such success as a mediator in the Middle East.

More subtly, [China](#) has put flesh on the bones of a series of foreign policy "initiatives" to create alternative structures for international co-operation, particularly with the developing world.

"China is now ready to gradually erode American leadership and promote Chinese governance," said Zhao Tong, a senior fellow at the Carnegie think-tank and a visiting scholar at Princeton University.

For China, the diplomatic push is a natural extension of its growing economic power, and one that aims to restore its historic role at the centre of global politics. It also plans to counter Washington's bid to "contain" China's rise by curbing its technological and military prowess.

For the US-led world order, meanwhile, [Xi](#)'s campaign represents its biggest challenge since the cold war.





China has adopted a more assertive stance on foreign relations, including the militarisation of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea © Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

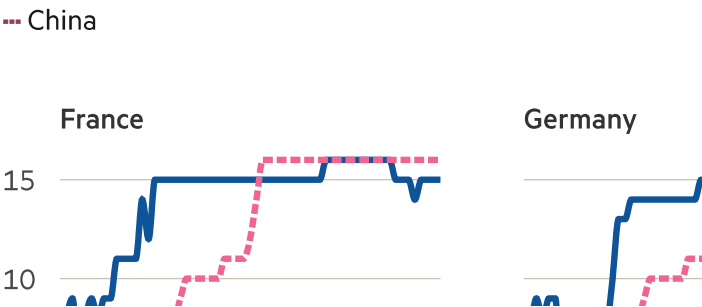
Since becoming China's Communist party leader a decade ago, Xi has adopted a more assertive stance on foreign relations. Alongside bombastic calls for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", he has militarised artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea, taken a more aggressive stance on Taiwan and adopted "wolf-warrior" loudspeaker diplomacy to shout down foreign critics.

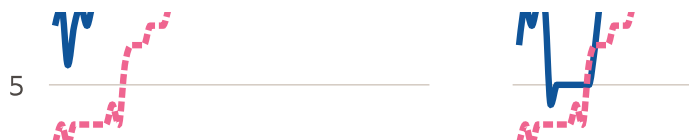
In October 2017, he [told](#) the party's 19th congress: "It is time for us to take centre stage in the world."

Now, Xi wants to consolidate that position. This month, he codified the [new foreign policy doctrine](#) with a 24-character formula that included the "dare to fight" phrase. The formula's sentence structure mirrored guidance handed down by the late reform-era leader Deng Xiaoping more than 30 years ago that counselled strategic patience on foreign relations. But Xi's version pointedly abandoned that principle. _

China has had more diplomatic missions in Middle Eastern countries than western nations since 2013

Number of diplomatic missions in Middle East by country

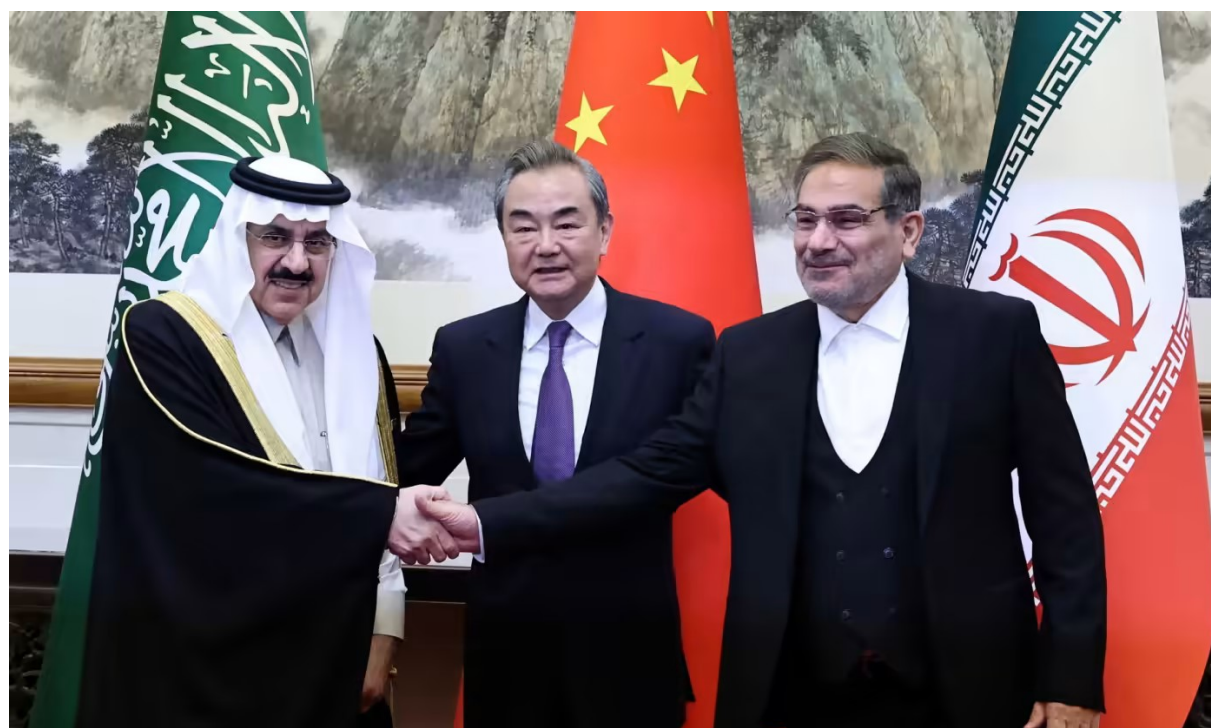




One Asian diplomat said Xi's 2017 speech had already called time on the Deng era, where China would "hide its strength and bide its time".

"But now [Xi] has officially replaced the Deng doctrine with something very different," the person said.

In this spirit, China for the first time played a decisive role this month as a mediator in a Middle Eastern dispute, [convincing Iran and Saudi Arabia](#) to resume diplomatic relations after a seven-year rift.





Beijing achieved a notable diplomatic success recently by mediating in the Middle East dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia © China Daily via Reuters

“In the past we would declare some principles, make our position known but not get involved operationally. That is going to change,” said Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai.

China has also sought to [portray itself as a proponent of peace in Ukraine](#), even though western capitals see Beijing’s position on the war as bolstering Vladimir Putin and recognising Russian conquest of Ukrainian territory.

Xi was expected to discuss Ukraine with Pedro Sánchez of Spain, who arrived in China on Thursday. Beijing hopes the Spanish prime minister’s two-day trip will prepare the ground for China-EU co-operation once Spain assumes the rotating presidency of the bloc in July, said one Chinese expert.

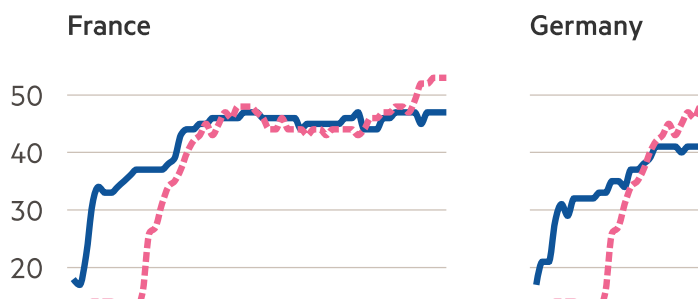
France’s Emmanuel Macron and Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, will also visit in the coming weeks. But while Xi’s efforts were welcomed by Putin, the Chinese leader has notably not called Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president of Ukraine, since his country was invaded.

Beijing is also vying for leadership of the developing world. In recent weeks, Xi has promoted what he calls “Chinese-style modernisation” as a concept better suited to developing countries than the west’s “rules-based” order.

China has had more diplomatic missions in African countries than western nations since 2016

Number of diplomatic missions in Africa by country

--- China



Following the introduction of his Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, focusing on infrastructure investments abroad, Xi launched the Global Development Initiative in 2021 — another push to use Chinese economic power to rally developing countries.

The following year, he announced the [Global Security Initiative](#) and this month he pitched the Global Civilisation Initiative, a still-vague policy that appears aimed at challenging the western concept of universal values.

“People need to . . . refrain from imposing their own values or models on others,” China’s State Council said on the latest initiative.



Xi Jinping delivers a key address via video link with world leaders © Yin Bogu/Xinhua/Eyevine

To mark the occasion, Xi held a conference call in a sparsely furnished hall with sympathetic political leaders from around the world appearing on a huge screen.

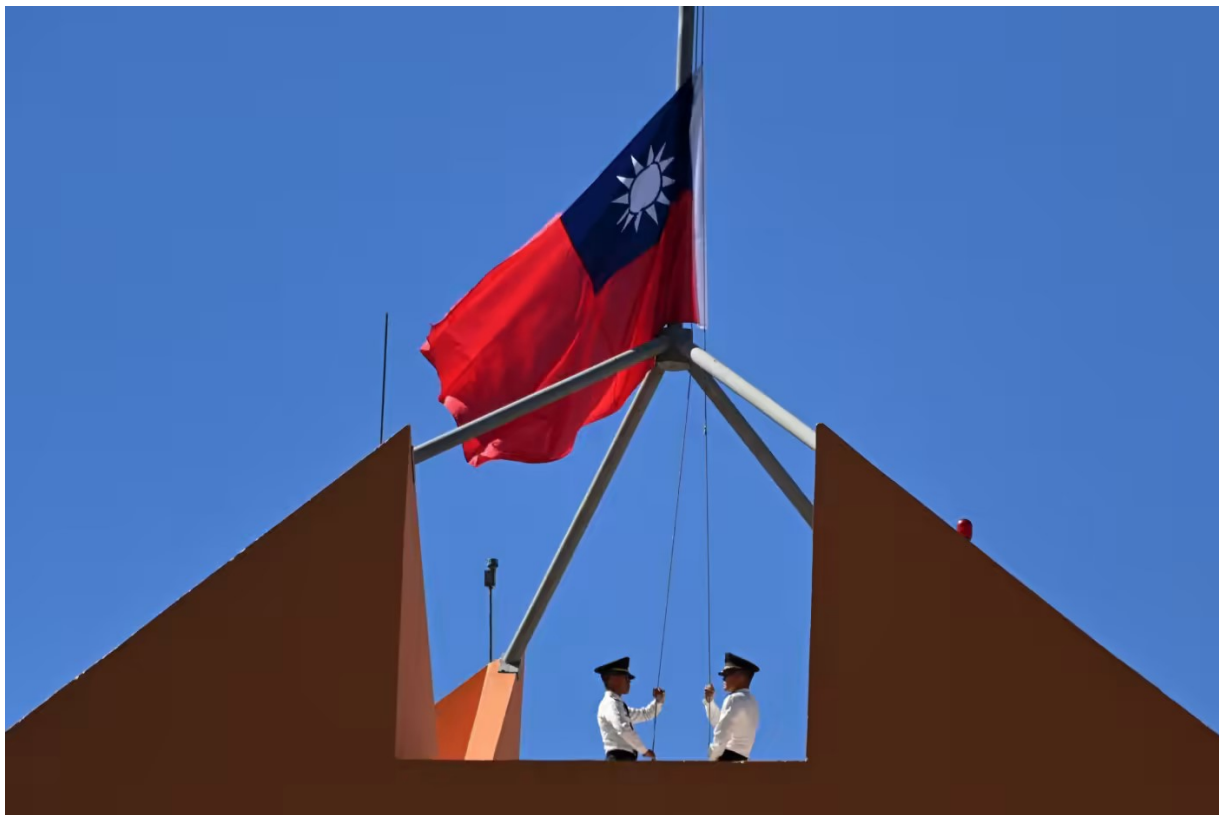
“We need to look at China’s foreign policy with new eyes because these moves are new,” said Tuvia Gering, a researcher with the Guilford Glazer Center at the Institute for National Security Studies, Israel.

China’s argument that modernisation did not have to equal westernisation would be well received in many developing countries, said Moritz Rudolf, a research scholar at Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center, particularly if it brought them material benefits from closer co-operation with Beijing.

“It appears to be a counterargument to [US president] Joe Biden’s autocracy versus democracy narrative,” said Rudolf. “It’s an ideological battle that’s more attractive to developing countries than people in Washington might believe.”

In Latin America, for instance, overall sentiment towards Beijing’s diplomatic strategy was positive, said Letícia Simões, assistant professor at La Salle University in Rio de Janeiro.

An article by a Chinese Communist party official last year said Beijing had already approved \$22bn of \$35bn in lending earmarked for countries in the region.



Taiwan's flag is lowered from its embassy in Honduras after the Central American nation officially cut ties with Taipei © Orlando Sierra/AFP/Getty Images

China's new world order: Xi Jinping unveils a new world order in Central America

Chinese largesse appears to be paying off politically in Central America, where over the past six years several countries, including [Honduras this month](#), have cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

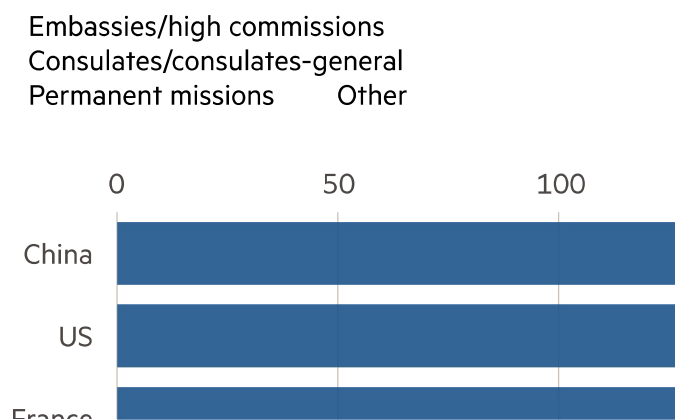
“Leftwing governments [in Latin America] tend to have a more positive attitude towards China, but even rightwing countries need a pragmatic relationship,” said Simões, pointing to China’s role as the largest trading partner of many countries in the region.

Analysts said that in the Iran-Saudi dispute, Beijing translated its trade dominance into geopolitical influence. They also predicted that China’s rapidly evolving military capabilities could enable it to start offering alternatives to the US in international security.

“China is signalling to states that China can guide foreign policy solutions,” said Courtney Fung, an associate fellow at the Lowy Institute.

China operates the world’s largest diplomatic network

Number of diplomatic missions in 2021, top 10 countries



China's more activist foreign policy was motivated partly by pragmatism, including the need to protect its increasingly global economic interests, as well as nationalism and geopolitics, analysts said.

“China wants to feel that we are a force in international affairs on par with our growing national power,” said Fudan University's Wu. “But another factor is the US's attempts at containing China. They want to isolate us, suppress us, demonise us, and so we need to acquire the ability to resist those efforts.”

The Ukraine war reinforced this narrative in the minds of some Chinese policymakers.

“They genuinely believe that the war was provoked by the west to finish off Russia, and that once Russia is defeated China will be next,” Zhao of Carnegie said. “Russia is China's most important teammate in the fight with the US, so there is no room for abandoning Russia.”



Russia's Vladimir Putin toasts Xi Jinping after inviting the Chinese president to visit Moscow © Pavel Byrkin/Sputnik/Kremlin/AP

Chinese diplomats and academics have debated for years how to square the country's growing global interests with its traditional doctrine of non-interference in other

countries' affairs. To provide a diplomatic framework for incidents such as China's evacuation of its citizens from Libya in 2011 and its anti-piracy missions around the Horn of Africa, they coined the term "constructive interference".

Chinese experts see this concept at work in Beijing's approach to the Ukraine war, which for western observers is undermined by contradictions. China, for instance, has not condemned Russia's invasion, nor has it explicitly supported Ukraine's sovereignty.

Many believe that China faces a steep learning curve as a peacemaker. "I would hope that China could play a mediating role in the Ukraine conflict, but it would be extremely difficult," said Zhang Xin, a Russia expert at East China Normal University.

The Iran and Saudi deal was more straightforward as both parties wanted more Chinese involvement in the region and both wanted an agreement, Zhang said.

Still, observers believe Beijing's foreign policy will only become more active. Chinese scholars see Afghanistan and North Korea and some Middle Eastern and African conflicts as areas where China can play a growing role, even though it has been involved for decades in international talks on Pyongyang's nuclear programme with few results.

Some even believe it could team up with the US in efforts towards peace. "There is still a lot of room for co-operation," said Fudan University's Wu.

Western scholars are more sceptical. But if Beijing's new appetite for mediation did "indicate that China is not going to be a free rider any more and use some of its political capital [to get deals done] . . . then it could be a good thing", said Paul Haenle at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Additional reporting by Michael Stott in London