In *The Dragon Roars Back*, Suisheng Zhao makes a significant contribution to the field of Chinese foreign policy by introducing a new conceptual framework to analyse the trajectory of China’s foreign policy since the Mao era. This innovative framework is designed to complement existing international relations theories by addressing the limitations of structural realism, comparative politics, and institutionalism. By offering a fresh perspective on Chinese foreign policy, Zhao’s framework moves beyond the overemphasis on structural factors in realism, the attribution of behaviour solely to authoritarianism in the regime-type theory, and the focus on bureaucratic politics in institutionalism.

This leadership-centred framework integrates multiple variables to explain China’s international behaviour, examining both structure and agency. Zhao argues that, in comparison to other regime types, leaders play a particularly significant role in totalitarian and authoritarian systems. This is because these systems place fewer institutional constraints on their power, providing them with more opportunities to realize their ambitions.

Zhao’s analysis of Chinese foreign policy reveals a significant continuity, which is the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a few top leaders. However, his framework goes beyond the traditional focus on leaders’ cognitive attributes, such as personality and leadership style. Instead, it enables him to examine how transformational leaders reshape the broader political and institutional environment to define priorities and implement their policies.

Zhao’s categorization of China’s five generations of leaders divides them into two distinct groups. Unlike those who lost power in political infighting, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping are regarded as transformational leaders. They hold lifetime tenures in power and possess the political capital to change policy direction. From Mao’s revolutionary diplomacy to Deng’s developmental diplomacy, and now Xi’s big-power diplomacy, transformational leaders have had a profound impact on the country’s foreign policy priorities, defensive and offensive postures, patterns of engagement with the international community, alignments with other major powers, and relationships with its neighbours (p. 6).

In contrast, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao can be described as transactional leaders who played a crucial role in consolidating the mechanism of collective leadership (p. 10). Operating within a higher level of institutional constraints, their ability to unilaterally dictate foreign policy decision-making was limited, which in turn created an environment that allowed for coordinated power dynamics. This approach rendered China’s behaviour more pragmatic and predictable throughout their terms in office.

A noteworthy strength of this book is its extensive utilization of CCP terminologies that are notoriously difficult to translate without appropriate articulation of the context, including “four consciousnesses” and “two safeguards” (p. 13). This aspect of the book is especially beneficial for students who frequently find themselves perplexed by the facile translations commonly used in media and policy outlets. Inaccurate translation can have detrimental consequences. In the article titled “Dare to fight or dare to struggle? Translation of a Chinese political concept,” Todd Hall and Xiaoyu Pu argue that inaccurate translations, such as the phrase “dare to fight,” not only overlook the nuanced complexities embedded in the historical context of ideological struggles but also create...
China and Its Small Neighbors: The Political Economy of Asymmetry, Vulnerability, and Hedging


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How do small powers engage with China in the Chinese neighbourhood? China and Its Small Neighbors, by Sung Chull Kim, provides a novel explanation with an emphasis on the political