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A Revanchist Chinese Foreign Policy, with Xi Jinping's Politics in Command

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on Steve Tsang's 'Party-state Realism': the most fitting theory to understand today's China, where the Party—Xi Jinping—'leads everything'. The article not only shows the deeper origins and aims of Chinese regional designs, but also what Xi's two-pronged strategy to regain regional primacy by 2049 looks like. The substantive part of the article has a section that elaborates the conventional military approach of balancing and war preparation; a section on China's indirect approach that involves psychological and public opinion warfare, United Front Work Department operations, and lawfare, intended to gradually chip away at weaker nations' resolve; and a section on the economic, institutional, and diplomatic practice that China abides by in the transition period when East Asia is returning to Sino-centrality.

KEYWORDS

East Asian security; Tsang's Party-state realism; political culture; Chinese foreign policy; Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy

Introduction

In the era of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, '[Chinese] foreign policy [was] the extension of China's domestic policies [and] China's primary task in the diplomatic sphere [was] to create a stable, peaceful, and favorable international environment'.¹ Economic development, facilitated by 'Opening Up' (as part of *gaige kaifang*) to Western and Japanese capital and technology, was the government's 'one central task'.² However, since Xi Jinping became paramount leader in 2012, he has used the material wealth and power (*fuqiang*) that his three predecessors had built up to 'get stronger' (*qiang qilai*) and expand China's influence in East Asia.³ Accordingly, Deng's foreign policy dictum of 'hide brightness, nourish obscurity' (*tao guang yang hui*), developed by the likes of Wang Jisi of liberal-leaning Peking University,⁴ has been exchanged for one where China 'strives for achievement' (*fenfa youwei*). 'Moral realist' Yan Xuetong of the Tsinghua approach centered on Chinese history and political thought has expounded the new dictum.⁵

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¹Lin Hai, 'Qian Qichen on the World Situation' (1990) 30 *Beijing Review* 12–13.

²See the June 9, 1989 speech 'June 9 speech to martial law units' in Deng Xiaoping, *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (Volume 3) (Foreign Languages Press 1994).

³People's Daily, 'Xi Jinping "7.26" zhongyao jianghua jingshen xilie jiedu zhi wu. cong zhan qilai, fu qilai dao qiang qilai de lishi xing feiyue' [The fifth interpretation of the spirit of Xi Jinping's '7.26' important speech series. A historic leap from standing up, getting rich, to getting stronger] (Beijing, 1 September 2017) <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0906/c40531-29517480.html>>.

⁴Wang Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy' (2011) 90 *Foreign Affairs* 71–73.

⁵Yan Xuetong, 'From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement' (2014) 2 *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 153–184.

No doubt, the defining feature of Xi's tenure is that 'politics'—ideology—has been put back 'in command'.⁶ With appreciation for China's specific material context, Xi has demanded strict adherence to his interpretation of Marxism-Leninism in the construction of 'Socialism'.⁷ In his proclaimed 'New Era', the Party has been brought back into every facet of government and society in China. 'Party, government, military, civilian, and academic, east, west, south, north, and center, the Party leads everything' (*dang, zheng, jun, min, xue, dong, xi, nan, bei, zhong, dang shi lingdao yiqie de*).⁸ Abroad, Xi's repoliticization is visible in what Kevin Rudd terms 'Marxist nationalism'⁹ and what has come to be known as 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. Returning to Lucian Pye's organizational culture-centered approach,¹⁰ Xi's top-level way of running the Party requires putting the leadership image back in. A paramount leader's governing ideology is here understood as his ability to theorize a convincing mobilization doctrine that is key to 'elicit Party cadres and government officials to identify with the top leadership, orient their behavior, and prevent their deviation from the leadership's guidelines'.¹¹ It puts forward the baselines on how policies from the center are to be interpreted, and, as a Marxist-Leninist doctrine, identifies the systemic obstacles—for example, the 'dangerous storms' of the last Party Congress—in the way of the 'final stage of socialism'.¹² Today, this is sold as 'national rejuvenation'.

As for Xi's view on regional order, this ultimately comes down to whether he feels 'the mountain'—East Asia—can contain 'two tigers' (*yishan burong erhu*, or 'a mountain cannot contain two tigers'), to quote a well-known Chinese proverb. That is, does he hold the view that 'the vast Pacific Ocean has enough space for two large countries',¹³ or does he believe that 'it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia'?¹⁴ The first quote comes from Xi's Sunnylands meeting with Barack Obama in 2013; the second from Xi's exclusionary 'Asia for Asians' speech delivered at the Boao Forum in 2014. Though not necessarily contradictory in Xi's mind, given the US's repeated signaling over the past decade that it intends to sustain its preeminent regional status, it is clear that the latter claim would entail the existing 'US-led' liberal order not 'retain[ing] all of [its] essential characteristics'.¹⁵ Although the interaction between the challenger state and the status quo power is important, this article focuses on the Chinese side of the equation, taking US China policy as a constant for the Chinese external environment. Given the bipartisan consensus in Washington on 'keeping China down' (*yazhi zhongguo*), as China views it, this American confrontational policy is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The following research question is posed:

How can the ideology and worldview of Xi Jinping, as captured in his Thought on Diplomacy, help explain China's regional designs for East Asia?

⁶Mao Tse-Tung, translated by Moss Roberts and annotated by Richard Levy, *A Critique of Soviet Economics* (Monthly Review Press 1977) 79.

⁷Xi Jinping, 'guanyu jianchi he fazhan zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi de jige wenti' [Several issues concerning upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics] (2019) *Qiushi*, 1 April, http://www.qsttheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-04/01/c_1124307480.htm.

⁸Xi Jinping, 'xi jinping: dang zheng junmin xue, dongxi nanbei zhong, dang shi lingdao yiqie de' [Xi Jinping: The party, government, civilian and learning—east, west, south and center—the party is leader of all] *The Paper* (Beijing, 30 January 2016) <http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1427461_1>.

⁹Kevin Rudd, 'The World According to Xi Jinping: What China's Ideologue in Chief Really Believes' (2022) 101 *Foreign Affairs* 10.

¹⁰Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (University of Michigan Press 1988).

¹¹Zheng Yongnian, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, reproduction, and transformation* (Routledge 2010) 83.

¹²Xi Jinping, 'gaoju zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida qizhi wei quanmian jianshe shehui zhuyi xiandaihua guojia er tuanjie fendou —zai zhongguo gongchandang di ershi ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao' [Hold high the great banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and work together to build a modern socialist country in an all-round way—report at the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China], *Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China* (Beijing, 16 October 2022) <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm>.

¹³BBC, 'Chinese leader Xi Jinping joins Obama for summit' (London, 8 June 2013) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22798572>>.

¹⁴Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'New Security Concept For New Progress on Security Cooperation' (Beijing, 21 May 2014), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/yzxhxzyrcshydsfch/t1159951.shtml.

¹⁵Karl W Deutsch and J David Singer, 'Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability' (1964) 16 *World Politics* 390.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews several theoretical approaches to this question, after which Steve Tsang's 'Party-state realism' is spelled out: the most fitting theory to understand Chinese foreign policy in the New Era. Section three articulates the revanchist ideas expounded in the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy doctrine and the political culture and historical memory that they originate from. The rest of the article is devoted to explaining how these theoretical and doctrinal tenets work in word and practice. It will include a section on the conventional military approach of balancing and war preparation, a section on China's indirect approach involving, among other methods, the Marxist-Leninist 'organizational weapon', and a section on economic, institutional, and diplomatic practice that China abides by in the transition period when East Asia returns to Sino-centrality.

Existing Literature and Tsang's Theory

Provided by the shift from the anomalous 'unipolar moment' after the Cold War toward a regional system where power is more diffusely distributed, 'pessimist realists'¹⁶ have argued that China would inevitably seek a larger stake in governing East Asian affairs. They maintain that under the condition of anarchy, rising powers feel that more security is needed to safeguard more economic interests—especially sea lanes.¹⁷ Moreover, greater economic and military power brings not only greater confidence but also dissatisfaction with the existing order. Often based on historical analogies, such as in Graham Allison's study on the 'Thucydides' Trap',¹⁸ American scholars such as Robert Kaplan¹⁹ and Christopher Layne²⁰ foresee an (near) inevitable cold or hot war between China and the US in East Asia. Potentially self-fulfilling, this kind of path dependency and Eurocentric mirror imaging can be found in much of the Western analyses of China. However, as Jack Levy adroitly observes, 'there are important gaps between the assumptions of the theory and the conditions that are likely to define the context for a possible Sino-American transition'.²¹

A parallel with today's China is the US seeking to become the hegemonic power in the Western hemisphere in accordance with its declared Monroe Doctrine. In the first half of the 19th century, the US succeeded rather easily in its expansion westward, Colin Elman argues, because potential extra-regional balancer France simply chose not to balance the American challenge of the colonial order. In other words, 'local considerations'²² matter in whether a revisionist power can transition into a position of dominance peacefully; nothing is preordained. At the same time, the regional systemic environment for China in contemporary East Asia differs markedly from that of the 19th-century Americas. Instead, it resembles more the strategic predicament of a rising Imperial Germany that had the economic and naval might (albeit declining) of the British Empire in its way in the late 19th and early 20th century. From Obama's 2009–2010 'pivot to Asia' onward, consecutive US administrations have interpreted China's resurgence as a strategic challenge and have moved to sustain the status quo of American regional primacy. Yet, while the shift in relative power and security dilemma dynamics is important,²³ the fact is that socio-historically and politically, China and East Asia differ decisively from the European experience that realist theory is built on. A more rewarding strand of thinking about China's desired place in the region is constructivism. Offering insights into how ideology and identity are constructed top-down, strategic cultural studies in particular can aid us in

¹⁶See Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The future of US-China Relations: Is conflict inevitable?' (2005) 30 *International Security* 16–24.

¹⁷John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia' (2010) 3 *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 384.

¹⁸Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Avoid the Thucydides' Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin 2017).

¹⁹Robert D. Kaplan, 'A New Cold War Has Begun' [2019] *Foreign Policy* <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>>.

²⁰Christopher Layne, 'Preventing the China-U.S. Cold War from Turning Hot' (2020) 13 *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 343–85.

²¹Jack S. Levy, 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China' in Robert Ross and Zhu Feng (eds) *China's Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics* (Cornell University Press 2008) 30–31.

²²Colin Elman, 'Extending Offensive Realism: The Louisiana Purchase and America's Rise to Regional Hegemony' (2004) 98 *American Political Science Review* 575.

²³Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave MacMillan 2008) 9.

explaining how ‘in-system reformers’ are able to radically alter the ideational foundations of a party and nation’s foreign policy doctrine.²⁴ This enables the inclusion of the ‘organizational process, history, tradition, and culture’ that is needed in our analytical framework.²⁵ Still, as for the moral dimension so characteristic of contemporary China, Feng Zhang rightly points to the limits of this approach in the case of China. Its ideas, he argues, ‘can only be known through detailed examination of China’s foreign policy discourse and behavior’²⁶; in other words, via culture-specific inductive reasoning. Feng Zhang and Benjamin Ho’s conceptions on Chinese exceptionalism (*zhongguo teshu lun*) are instructive in this regard. They correctly posit that China sees itself as unique, even superior, and is hence not bound to the rules that were established before it resurged as a great power with Deng’s Reform and Opening Up.²⁷

Ultimately, as touched on above, in any cultural approach, the repoliticized Party must be placed at the forefront of analysis, as the rest of China’s ‘domestic state structure’,²⁸ in neoclassical realist terms, no longer plays a role apart from policymaking and implementation. And the Party line (*luxian*) is what the People’s Leader (*renmin lingxiu*) says it is. Now in Xi’s third term, propaganda outlets champion Xi’s leadership and ideas (the ‘Two Establishes’, or *liangge quel*)²⁹ as the country’s sole ‘compass’ (*zhinanzhen*).³⁰ On the first day of the newly ‘elected’ Central Committee, the members of which Xi was said to have personally vetted,³¹ he led six loyalists from his days in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai onto the podium in the Great Hall of the People, presenting the new Politburo Standing Committee. This signaled that for the next 5 to 10 years at least, and likely while Xi (born 1953) is alive, it is all Xi.

Awarding more weight to domestic factors compared to systemic ones, and as such more aligned with the *Innenpolitik* tradition, is Steve Tsang’s eclectic theorization of Chinese foreign policy. With its consultative Leninist political system at the heart, it provides a promising new avenue in filling the lacunas between realism and constructivism. It adopts a culturalist approach while theorizing the Party in the form Xi remade it. Tsang’s ‘Party-first’ ‘Party-state Realism’ theory contends that it is regime survival, China’s political stability (*zhengzhi wending*), that is the overarching imperative in constituting and defending China’s ‘core interests’ (*hexin liyi*).³² This goes to the indivisibility of the people and the Party. China’s (public) 2025 National Security Strategy stresses ‘putting political security first’; the ‘lifeline of China’s national security in the New Era’. ‘The core of political security is regime security and system security’.³³ The importance placed on maintaining social stability (*weiwen*) is a good example to illustrate this first characteristic of the theory. A dissatisfied, unruly populace can threaten the CCP’s hold on power, as transpired in June 1989, its overbearing organizational trauma. To deflect attention from its own shortcomings and responsibilities, the

²⁴Robert G Herman, ‘Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War’ in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Columbia University Press 1996) chap. 8.

²⁵Jeffrey S Lantis, ‘In Defense of the National Profile: Strategic Culture Then and Now’ in Kerry M Kartchner, Briana D Bowen, and Jeannie L Johnson (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture* (Routledge 2024) 122.

²⁶Feng Zhang, ‘The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations’ (2011) 19 *European Journal of International Relations* 307.

²⁷Benjamin Ho, ‘Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China’s Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness’ (2014) 39 *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 165–6.

²⁸Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’ (1998) 51 *World Politics* 152.

²⁹Xinhua News Agency, ‘*kaiqi xin zhengcheng xuxie xin shishi*’ [Start a new journey and write a new epic] *China News* (Beijing, 1 January 2018) <<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2018/01-01/8413704.shtml>>.

³⁰CCTV, ‘*renmin ribao ren zhongping wenzhang: zhangwo lishi zhudong ningju fenjin weili*’ [People’s Daily Ren Zhongping article: Grasp the historical initiative and gather great strength] (28 September 2022) <<https://tv.cctv.com/2022/09/28/VIDEgqFfxWloragb6nzExFvr220928.shtml?spm=C31267.PXDaChrrDGdt.EbD5Beq0unlQ.11>>.

³¹Josephine Ma, ‘President Xi Jinping “personally” vetted selection of top Communist Party team, Xinhua says’ *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong, 24 October 2022) <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3196972/chinese-president-xi-personally-vetted-selection-top-communist-party-team-xinhua-says>>.

³²Steve Tsang, ‘Party-state Realism: A Framework for Understanding China’s Approach to Foreign Policy’ (2020) 122 *Journal of Contemporary China* 305–306ff.

³³Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, ‘*xin shidai de zhongguo guojia anquan baipishu | xin shidai de zhongguo guojia anquan*’ [White Paper on China’s national security in the New Era | China’s national security in the New Era], *State Council Information Office* (12 May 2025), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/fgwx/bps/16385614.html>.

Party uses 'hostile foreign forces' (*jingwai didui shili*) that it can project as trying to foment a 'color revolution' in China; think of the alleged 'black hand' behind the vast and protracted demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2019.³⁴ That confronting American bullying—Chinese behavior that is meant, principally, for domestic audiences—is detrimental to stable relations with the West and the trade ties that it is still heavily reliant upon is of secondary importance.

This brings us to the second-ranked characteristic of Party-state Realism: party-centric nationalism.³⁵ Expressions thereof can be found in China taking on leadership roles in multilateral venues or initiatives. This is viewed as especially valuable if Xi's (Wang Huning's) wisdom and statesmanship can be channeled back home. Participating in a UN peacekeeping mission, for example, is what Xiaoyu Pu calls 'conspicuous consumption' intended to signal high international status (prestige) as a peacemaker.³⁶ Naturally, evoked feelings of pride in the nation cannot be dampened by China losing face in an international dispute, particularly when this would defeat boisterous promises the Party has made in the past. This circumscribes the range of policy opportunities the international system would otherwise offer, and the soft power that can be credibly generated.³⁷ Invoking moral notions of justice and fairness, and using (negative) emotive language in doing so,³⁸ the central promise that must be upheld is encapsulated by the propaganda slogan 'without the Party, no New China' (*meiyou gongchandang jiu meiyou xin zhongguo*). This points to the integral relationship between the past, when the West and Japan humiliated China, and the present and future, where it has regained its rightful status in the region and the world. Indeed, Xi's explicit mention of 'global' in 'Global Civilization Initiative' (*quanqiu wenming changyi*), 'Global Development Initiative' (*quanqiu fazhan changyi*), and 'Global Security Initiative' (*quanqiu anquan changyi*) suggests that at least its normative claims stretch beyond East Asia.

If not concerning something that can be perceived domestically as inflicting harm on the 'dignity' of China, China adopts an instrumentalist approach. This concerns the third-ranked characteristic of Tsang's Party-state Realism theory. In practice, this means that in most cases China behaves toward economic partners and vis-à-vis international bodies, rules and norms, and bilateral or multilateral diplomatic affairs as a decidedly rational, transactional actor.³⁹ China calculates risks and benefits with a high degree of pragmatism. Yet, while China works with the existing (Western, liberal) rules of the game, it does not itself intrinsically believe in them. This sometimes results in evident inconsistencies with its righteous claims. Nevertheless, when a liberal rule does align with Chinese interests, China will be front and center mimicking the accompanying status quo language. For instance, China's non-intervention principle fits neatly with the international legal principle by the same name, which relates to sovereignty and territorial integrity. The principle can be employed both to shield China from scrutiny over its human rights record in Xinjiang and serve as an effective frame to use against US military adventurism in the Muslim world.

Only after these three political culture-specific characteristics do the neoclassical realist considerations of the national (as in the country, not the regime) interest, the relative power equation, and China's position (influence) in the international system come in. These externalities are 'not the primary driver of Chinese foreign policy'; domestic politics, regime survival, are.⁴⁰ Compared to neoclassical realism, which Tsang explicitly incorporates into his theory, Tsang further accentuates the steering role the Party's ideology plays in, for instance, the subversive ground game of the United Front Work Department. More important, Marxism-Leninism helps to prioritize strategic ends and

³⁴People's Daily, 'yifa chengzhi "gang du" "hei bao" shi minxin suo xiang' [Punishing 'Hong Kong independence' and 'black violence' according to law is what the people want] (Beijing, 1 June 2020) <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmr/html/202006/01/nw.D110000renmr_20200601_301.htm?from=singlemessage&fbclid=IwAR1GUI2np1wEve3VMzy-KD8u0Q24Dy9-1nhGmyRfEVffPIIPABa6jtG90c>.

³⁵Tsang, Party-state Realism, 312, 317.

³⁶See Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford University Press 2019) 52–53.

³⁷Tsang, Party-state Realism, 313.

³⁸See on the power of emotions in the Xi era Kerry Brown, 'The Xi Way of Speaking: Rhetoric, Emotion and Narrative in the Modern People's Republic of China' in Lance LP Gore (ed), *The Chinese Communist Party in Transformation: The Crisis of Identity and the Possibilities for Renewal* (World Scientific Publishing 2021) 23–40.

³⁹Tsang, Party-state Realism, 306, 310ff.

⁴⁰ibid 304, 305.

connect all available means to them.⁴¹ As Tsang puts it, the Party's supposed dialectical materialist lens 'requires [it] to identify a principal enemy, its supporters, and the intermediate zone full of "wavering elements" that can be won over by either the Party or its principal enemy'. Taking to heart Lord Palmerston's dictum about the temporality of both allies and enemies, alignments are temporary and expedient, can shift over time, and are formed to weaken the principal enemy. As in the previous characteristic, it does not believe in forged relationships beyond material gain. When the principal enemy is removed from the board as a systemic obstacle, the actor that has now become most powerful in the strategic configuration is selected as the new principal enemy to focus all means toward.⁴²

The Doctrine: Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy

With Xi trumpeting China as moving 'closer than ever to the center of the world stage',⁴³ the first step must be an examination of what Xi's China wants to replace the current liberal US-led order in East Asia with. To begin with, what does the propagated 'Community of Common Destiny for Mankind' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) mean? The wording of this frame implies that the world's nations—mankind—should conform to, or at least acquiesce to being part of, the same common enterprise that is reconfigured according to envisioned regional and international changes. But just as the Western terming of Chinese 'assertiveness', which can be translated as *riqū qiangying*, or 'increasingly tough', has a negative connotation, so does 'hegemony' (*baquan*). Now often coming with the accusation of a US 'Cold War mentality' (*lengzhan siwei*), a hegemon in ancient Chinese philosophy refers to a wicked sovereign who rules via force and coercion. Hence, China's grand strategic aim to once again become the 'central nation' (this is the literal name of China in Mandarin: *zhongguo*) in East Asian order would not be phrased in such explicit and confident terms. Surely China, a self-perceived benevolent power—in dynastic terminology *wang*, or 'sage king'—would never 'seek regional hegemony or [a] sphere of influence'.⁴⁴ Introduced by Hu Jintao, the latter claim has remained a consistent part of China's Peaceful Rise/Development lexicon under Xi Jinping.⁴⁵ Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy gives us insight into what kind of alternate model, and with which non-liberal characteristics and norms, China will attempt to replace the current order with until 2049. This is the year when China will (without a doubt) reach the second of the Two Centennial Goals and achieve the abstract end goal of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. In essence, Xi Jinping Thought develops Xi's 2014 call for an own Sinic foreign policy doctrine, one that exhibits 'distinctly Chinese characteristics, a Chinese style, and a Chinese manner'.⁴⁶ The late Qing Self-strengtheners would recognize this as practicing Western 'applications' (*yong*), dealing with the Western system, using capitalist techniques, etcetera, while retaining 'Chinese learning' (*zhongxue*) for the body, the core (*ti*): Zhang Zhidong's *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*.⁴⁷

When we examine Xi's Ten Persistences (*shige jianchi*), the 'essential requirements of big power (*daguo*) diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' is first and foremost about 'maintaining the authority and centralized leadership of the [Central Committee leadership] with comrade Xi at the core'.⁴⁸

⁴¹ibid 314.

⁴²ibid 314–5.

⁴³Yang Jiechi, 'Studying General Secretary Xi Jinping's Thought on Diplomacy' *Qiushi* (28 November 2017) <http://english.qstheory.cn/2017-11/28/c_1122007258.htm>.

⁴⁴State Council of the People's Republic of China, 'China's Peaceful Development' (Beijing, September 2011) <http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm>.

⁴⁵For the present Xi era, see his September 28, 2015 speech 'A New Partnership of Mutual Benefit and a Community of Shared Future' in Xi Jinping, *Governance of China II* (Foreign Languages Press 2017) 574.

⁴⁶Xi Jinping, 'zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi zaijing juxing xi jinpings fabiao zhongyao jianghua' [Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference held in Beijing, Xi Jinping delivers important speech] *People's Daily* (30 November 2014) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1130/c64094-26119225.html>>.

⁴⁷Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 18, 76.

⁴⁸Yang Jiechi, 'yi xi jinpings waijiao sixiang wei zhidao shenru tuijin xin shidai duiwai gongzuo' [Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, deeply advance foreign work in the New Era], *Qiushi* (1 August 2018) <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-08/01/c_1123209510.htm>.

In other words, Chinese foreign policy will remain a one-man show in the government quarters of *zhongnanhai*. It is here argued that the 'sensory capability, historical memory, and psychological make-up'⁴⁹ of the sent-down youth generation now at the helm matters in how they view China and the outside world. Shaped by an austere, Cultural Revolution-shaped mindset of struggle, they truly believe that the wrongs of the Century of Humiliation must be righted, and that Xi's 'hard authoritarian'⁵⁰ line at home and an assertive stance abroad, where China 'strives for maximum achievements' (*liqiu qude zuida xiaoguo*),⁵¹ is the way to do it. As a result, Chinese foreign policy is to remain zero-sum competition abroad.

The domestic realm plays a central role in Xi Jinping Thought. Throughout its history, China's rulers have been clear-eyed about the interrelationship between foreign affairs and domestic security: the idiom *nei luan wai huan* (internal trouble invites outside aggression) from dynastic times captures this fear. Consequently, at home, China practices zero tolerance; the overt and covert Party and police state apparatus that Dickson has detailed comprehensively.⁵² As per the July 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law, the Party-state shall 'resolutely curb and crack down on all forms of separatism'. Xi's Work Report to the 20th Party Congress, with 91 mentions of the word 'security' (*anquan*), suggests an unprecedented broader securitization of non-compliance with the central Party line. China also continues to 'resolutely defend national sovereignty' when it comes to its 'core interests'. Long denied during the Obama years, the South China Sea is now explicitly mentioned as a core interest, meaning that, in principle, China could go to war to defend it.

In a 'crucial stage', China's historic mission remains to 'preserve and extend the important period of strategic opportunity (*zhanlue jiyuqi*) for China's development' in order to achieve the Chinese Dream of collective and individual prosperity.⁵³ The hundredth anniversary of the People's Republic in 2049 should coincide with China having become a 'powerful modern socialist country' (*shehui zhuyi xiandaihua qiangguo*). The word 'powerful' that was later added as an adjective to the previous term has a clear relative dimension vis-à-vis competitor nations. China becoming 'prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious' is the *chuxin*, the Party's (Mao and Deng's) 'original aspiration'.⁵⁴

On the foreign security front, conceptually, China continues to see the US as its main enemy and will continue to counter-balance against it while arguing for 'universal security' (*pubian anquan*) or 'common security' (*gongtong anquan*), meaning 'multipolarity' (*duojihua*) without the threatening alliances the US maintains. China frames the latter as the forging of exclusionary 'small circles' (*xiao quanze*). China also advances a 'new type of international relations' (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) with other major powers, selling it as a Yan Xuetong-like moral policy of 'mutually beneficial' (*shuangying*) or 'win-win cooperation' (*hezuo gongying*). In this language of manipulation and control, exceptionalist China allegedly upholding 'genuine multilateralism' (*zhenzheng de duobian zhuyi*), China tries to juxtapose its own superior narrative with supposedly outdated Western liberal notions underpinning the existing international order.

As for rhetoric and tone, the front end of Xi's Thought on Diplomacy, China's 'foreign work in the New Era' shall follow the 'Four Confidences': confidence in the socialist path, theory, system, and

⁴⁹Quotation in Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda For International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991) 343.

⁵⁰David Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Polity Press 2016), 29, 250ff (eBook).

⁵¹Xi Jinping, 'xi jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotan hui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua' [Xi Jinping delivers important speech at symposium on neighboring diplomatic work], *People's Daily* (Beijing, 23 October 2013) <<http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1025/c1024-2332318-2.html>>.

⁵²See Bruce J Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (Oxford University Press 2016) in particular chap. 2.

⁵³Yang, 'Studying General Secretary Xi Jinping's Thought'.

⁵⁴People's Daily, 'kaiqi quanmian jianshe shehui zhuyi xiandaihua guojia xin zhengcheng' [Start a new journey of building a modern socialist country in an all-round way] (Beijing, 29 July 2019) <<http://chuxin.people.cn/n1/2019/0729/c428144-31260753.html>>; on the Party's Propaganda and Ideological Work under the slogan 'not forgetting the original intention' (*buwang chuxin*), see People's Daily, 'xin shidai dang de xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo de genben zunxun' [The fundamental principles of the Party's propaganda and ideological work in the New Era] (Beijing, 4 January 2021) <<http://chuxin.people.cn/n1/2021/0104/c428144-31987915.html>>.

culture with Chinese characteristics.⁵⁵ This ‘spirit of struggle’ (*douzheng jingshen*) was mandated by Xi in August 2017–2018 and produced the aggressive ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy by China’s foreign affairs corps during the COVID-19 pandemic. Xi, speaking to a domestic audience celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Party, warned in July 2021 that ‘foreign forces’ (*jingwai shili*) that try to ‘bully, oppress, or enslave’ China will ‘surely shed blood on a Great Wall of Steel built by more than 1.4 billion Chinese people’.⁵⁶ This intimidating tone will likely be retained with respect to domestically sensitive issues and those that play well to the nationalist base at home.

Further, the ‘reform of the global governance system’ to make it more ‘fair’ in relation to China’s grown power is a long-cherished CCP ambition.⁵⁷ Falling under China’s equality principle, we can recall Hu Jintao’s call for the ‘democratization’ of international relations in 2009–2010.⁵⁸ In fact, the ambition even dates back to the time before China obtained its hard-fought seat at the UN replacing Taiwan, the Republic of China, in 1971. But it has been more systematically pursued since Hu’s attendance at the April 2009 G20 Summit⁵⁹ and relates to, for instance, China’s ‘economic and financial security’⁶⁰ from the US dollar, the powerful American financial system, and the debilitating sanctions that the US government can impose on adversaries. Chinese observers have carefully studied the latter in the Ukraine case, as well as the US and allied nations’ sanctions’ secondary effect.

Furthermore, China is believed to want to sustain its effort to make its own authoritarian system of governance *salonfähig*, acceptable to the world: China as a respected ‘normal country’ with a legitimate place in the world order. Ideationally, this sense of insecurity about its governing system harks back to Deng’s speeches following the Tiananmen Square Massacre, when he asserted that the Party had become too lax with the ideological education of the masses. Then, he said ‘imperialists’ (the US and the West) were plotting a ‘peaceful evolution’ (*heping yanbian*) of China’s socialist governing system.⁶¹ The combating of hostile liberal ideas domestically along the lines of Document No. 9 thus has a long trajectory. However, what is something of the last half-decade is that China tries to strengthen its non-interference in internal affairs principle abroad by mobilizing other non-democratic nations to at least not contradict China’s narrative and, perhaps, even mimic it.

Hence, instead of just lashing out against foreign attempts to ‘smear China’ (*ruhua*, which connotes unjustifiably losing face, being humiliated) over, for instance, its autocratic political system or human rights abuses, rival ‘Chinese solutions’ (*zhongguo fangan*) are promoted to ostensibly ‘aid humanity’s search for a better [development and governing] system’. Here, the domestic line is turned outward, as cadres are instructed to ‘adhere to the foundation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to enhance strategic self-confidence (*zhanlue zixin*)’ abroad: ‘doing our own thing well’.⁶² This ‘Chinese-style modernization’ (*zhongguo shi xiandaihua*) is projected in the direction of

⁵⁵People’s Daily, ‘renmin ribao zheng ban taolun: jianding sigu zixin de jiben yijiu’ [People’s Daily full-page discussion: the basis for strengthening the ‘four self-confidences’] (Beijing, 1 July 2020) <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0107/c1003-31536785.html>>.

⁵⁶Xi Jinping, ‘xi jinping: zai qingzhu zhongguo gongchandang chengli 100 zhounian dahui shang de jianghua’ [Xi Jinping: Speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China], *Xinhua News Agency* (Beijing, 1 July 2021) <http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-07/01/c_1127615334.htm>; and see, displaying perhaps the most unabashed sense of grandeur and zeal since pre-1978 ideological times—that is, all propaganda and limited actual content—Yang Jiechi, ‘xi jinping waijiao sixiang zhiyin dang de waishi gongzuo qude guanghui chengjiu’ [Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy guides the Party’s foreign affairs work to achieve brilliant achievements], *People’s Daily* (Beijing, 3 July 2021) <https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-07/03/content_34968753.htm>.

⁵⁷Yang, ‘Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy’.

⁵⁸People’s Daily, ‘President Hu elaborates the theory of harmonious world’ (Beijing, 26 November 2009) <<http://en.people.cn/90001/90780/91342/6824821.html>>; *Xinhua News Agency*, ‘Chinese president calls for correct view on history’, *China Daily* (Beijing, 8 May 2010) <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010russiatour/2010-05/08/content_9825856.htm>.

⁵⁹See *Xinhua News Agency*, ‘China goes to G20 summit with reform proposal’, *China Daily* (Beijing, 1 April 2009) <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/01/content_7640191.htm>.

⁶⁰Yang, ‘Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy’.

⁶¹See, for example, the September 16, 1989 speech ‘We Are Confident That We Can Handle China’s Affairs Well’ in Deng, *Selected Works* (Volume 3).

⁶²Yuan Jifu, ‘ba women ziji de shiqing zuo hao (sixiang zongheng)’ [Doing our own thing well (thought-provoking)], *People’s Daily* (Beijing, 24 August 2022) <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0824/c40531-32509894.html>>.

the developing world⁶³ with, disconcertingly, the Party in August 2023 opening a Party School-like institution in Africa that teaches authoritarian methods and ideological mobilization.⁶⁴ The Mao era slogan ‘the East is rising and the West declining’, which saw a comeback during the days of Xi’s zero-COVID policy that was long promoted as superior,⁶⁵ should be seen in that light. The slogan is a more explicit version of the slogan ‘the world today is undergoing major changes unseen in a century’; that is, presumably, since the US rose as an industrial powerhouse in the late 19th and early 20th century.⁶⁶ China seeking international discourse power (*huayu quan*)⁶⁷ ought to be viewed as part of Xi’s broader ‘public opinion struggle ... to create a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China’.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, China’s soft power appears to have reached an all-time low in recent years, likely as a result of Xi’s hard-handed policies at home and the role that the CCP played in letting the COVID-19 virus escape China.⁶⁹ Whether or not Xi’s ‘Chinese solutions’ resonate abroad, one might also question whether they are devised to be a real alternative beyond counter-narrative. At the same time, while in the 21st century there are unlikely to be countries adopting a CCP-style model, the across-the-board plummeting of China’s favorability rating among the publics of the foremost OECD countries does not necessarily extend to countries that are less well off.⁷⁰ While in 2022, only 12% of South Korea’s public had confidence in Xi Jinping, that number was 62% in Malaysia.⁷¹ Especially countries in the Global South that do not score high in the Economist Democracy Index may still be (transactionally) interested in technology (surveillance?), trade opportunities, and (financed) infrastructure without (by some as neocolonial perceived) liberalizations mandated by Western countries and Western-led institutions.

Application in Practice: The Conventional Approach

It was the disparity with the competitive system of European nation-states, states that had perfected the extraction of material resources, were well organized in logistics and management, and had advanced maritime and weapons technology, that brought the pre-modern hegemonic empire of the Qing to its knees in the second half of the 19th century.⁷² As Xi expressed it in his foundational speech upon becoming general secretary, ‘Reviewing the past, all Party members must bear in mind that backwardness left us vulnerable to attack, whereas only development makes us strong’.⁷³ It is

⁶³He Zhongguo, ‘wei sheme shuo zhongguo shi xiandaihua dapole “xiandaihua = xihua” de mi si’ [Why is it said that Chinese-style modernization has broken the myth of ‘modernization = Westernization’], *CPC News* (Beijing, 10 February 2023) <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0210/c40531-32621164.html>>.

⁶⁴Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, ‘In Tanzania, Beijing is running a training school for authoritarianism’, *Axios* (Arlington, 21 August 2023) <<https://www.axios.com/2023/08/21/chinese-communist-party-training-school-africa>>.

⁶⁵William Zheng, ‘China’s officials play up “rise of the East, decline of the West”’, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong, 9 March 2021) <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3124752/chinas-officials-play-rise-east-decline-west>>.

⁶⁶Xi Jinping, ‘Xi Jinping Attends the 2022 World Economic Forum Virtual Session and Delivers a Speech’, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China* (18 January 2022) <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202201/t20220118_10629754.html>.

⁶⁷Kejin Zhao, ‘China’s Rise and its Discursive Power Strategy’ (2016) 1 *Chinese Political Science Review* 539–64.

⁶⁸Xinhua News Agency, ‘xi jinping zai zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhi ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gaijin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi liti quanmian de zhongguo’ [Xi Jinping stressed during the 30th collective study of the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee to strengthen and improve international communication efforts to show a true, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China] (Beijing, 1 June 2021) <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/01/c_1127517461.htm>.

⁶⁹See, credibly, Chris Buckley, David D Kirkpatrick, Amy Qin, and Javier C Hernández, ‘25 Days That Changed The World: How COVID-19 Slipped Out Of China’, *New York Times* (New York, 30 December 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/30/world/asia/china-coronavirus.html>>.

⁷⁰PEW Research Center, ‘Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries’ (6 October 2020) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>>.

⁷¹PEW Research Center, ‘How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era’ (28 September 2022) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/09/28/how-global-public-opinion-of-china-has-shifted-in-the-xi-era/>>.

⁷²On the technological and organizational revolution in the application of force, see James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in East Asia* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 17–33.

⁷³Xi Jinping’s speech at the National Museum on Tiananmen Square on 29 November 2012, entitled ‘Achieving the Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People’. In: Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Foreign Languages Press 2014) 37.

this overwhelming national sense of ‘never again’ that goes a long way in explaining China’s zeal to arm against a threat not immediately apparent, which, in turn, led the US to balance against it with allies from Obama’s pivot onward. The resultant spiral dynamics created less security all-round.⁷⁴ Contemporary China’s proclaimed greatness and relative systemic position, and the strong determination to never be trampled on again, allow us to connect Xi’s ‘powerful military dream’ (*qiangjun meng*) to the deeply felt need to protect China’s accumulated ‘wealth and power’.⁷⁵

In fact, from the self-strengthening movement (*zhiqiang yundong*) onward, there has been great continuity in modern Chinese leaders’ ambitions when it comes to building up ‘comprehensive national power’ (*zonghe guoli*) in relation to regional peer competitors.⁷⁶ A crucial variable herein has always been creating strategic depth vis-à-vis outer ‘barbarians’ (*yi*). In this territorial understanding, the concern pertains most pressingly to the ‘near seas’ (*jinhai*): the East and South China Seas and the Yellow Sea. As Chiang put it, without controlling the ‘lost territories’, or natural ‘fortresses’, there could be no ‘glorious prospect of national renewal’.⁷⁷ Xi Jinping’s drive to assimilate ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, but also in Inner-Mongolia and Tibet, and its consolidation of control in Hong Kong should be seen as the domestic side of China’s quest to unify the lands (the ‘great unity’ during the time of the dynasties, or *da yitong*) under Han-CCP supremacy.

Ever since the Korean War that China fought against the US, and the subsequent American forward basing in what Chinese propaganda portrays as the ‘vassal’ (*fuyong*) nations of South Korea and Japan, it has been all about the US—the principal enemy—when leaders devise regional security policy. In a first, Xi, during the 2022 Two Sessions, mentioned the US directly by name, saying, ‘Western countries led by the US have implemented an all-round containment (*ezhi*), encirclement (*weidu*), and suppression (*daya*) against us’.⁷⁸ If this viewpoint is taken at face value, in realist terms, China’s post-Gulf War military modernization and expansion, and its investments in asymmetric capabilities specifically aimed at offsetting American power projection capabilities in East Asia, would point more in the direction of a defensive security maximization than the offensive power maximization American ‘pessimist realists’ typically advance.

As modern threats arrived at its long Eastern seaboard, which at present holds China’s economic heartland in the Eastern region, we in particular have to look at Xi’s aspiration for China to attain the status of a ‘strong naval power’ (*haiyang qiangguo*). Xi has directly tied this to the safeguarding of economic interests and achieving national rejuvenation.⁷⁹ Newly unearthed speeches that Xi gave to military leaders from 2012–2016 corroborate the strategic intentions that can be deduced from the capabilities that China has developed: they are designed to push back American military power.⁸⁰ If China follows the Mahanian strategy the father of the PLA Navy Liu Huaqing devised, by 2049 China will have expanded its reach into the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean using its nascent blue water

⁷⁴Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press 1976) 62–76.

⁷⁵Fan Changlong, ‘*wei jianshe yi zhi ting dang zhihui neng da shengzhang zuofeng youliang de renmin jundui er fendou: xuexi guanche xi zhuxi guanyu dang zai xin xingshi xia de qiang jun mubiao zhongyao sixiang*’ [Struggling to build a People’s Army that listens to the Party’s command and can win battles with excellent style: Learning and implementing President Xi’s important thoughts on the Party’s strong military goals in the new situation] (2013) 15 *Qiushi*.

⁷⁶See Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century* (Random House 2014) chap. 1.

⁷⁷Chiang Kai-shek with notes and commentary by Philip J Jaffe, *China’s Destiny & Chinese Economic Theory* (Roy Publishers 1947) 34–36.

⁷⁸Xi Jinping, ‘*xi jinping zai kanwang canjia zhengxie huiyi de min jian gongshang lian jie weiyuan shi qiangdiao zhengque yindao minying jingji jiankang fazhan gao zhiliang fazhan*’ [When Xi Jinping visited the members of the Federation of Democratic Construction Industry and Commerce who participated in the CPPCC meeting, he emphasized that the private economy should be correctly guided to develop in a healthy and high-quality way], *Xinhua News Agency* (Beijing, 6 March 2023) <http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-03/06/c_1129417096.htm>.

⁷⁹Xi Jinping, ‘*jinyibu guanxin haiyang renshi haiyang jing lue haiyang tuidong haiyang qiangguo jianshe buduan qude xin chengjiu*’ [Continue concern for the ocean, understand the ocean, manage the ocean, and promote the construction of a maritime power to continuously achieve new achievements], *People’s Daily* (Beijing, 1 August 1 2013) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0801/c64094-22402107.html>>.

⁸⁰The speeches are bundled in the volumes ‘Xi Jinping’s Selected Major Statements on National Defense and Military Development’. See Chris Buckley, ‘Behind Public Assurances, Xi Jinping Spread Grim Views on the U.S.’, *New York Times* (New York, 13 November 2023) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/13/world/asia/china-xi-asia-pacific-summit.html>>.

power projection capabilities. By 2035, China will only have limited capacity to conduct and sustain air, naval, and Rocket Force joint operations in the far seas beyond the Second Island Chain (Guam) and the Malacca Strait.⁸¹ This shows the material and particularly technological limitations to a great power's ambition to expand its influence more rapidly without a long tradition and knowledge base. Although China has made great advances in recent years in terms of both nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles, it will not be there for some time to come. According to US intelligence estimates, China in 2024 had an estimated 600 nuclear warheads and is expected to have operational 1,000 by 2030.⁸² By comparison, the US has more than nine times today's Chinese number. Mutual American and Chinese nuclear deterrent forces will likely prevent the all-out war needed to alter the status quo through force in the way most of Graham Allison's challenger states did before the advent of the nuclear age.⁸³

Since the breakdown of the 'G2', or 'Chimera', when Barack Obama launched the US 'pivot to Asia', China has also attempted to counter-balance American regional preponderance by enlisting Russia as a tacit ally of convenience. Only more recently has China been more explicit about Moscow's strategic value—mostly its nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles and naval forces. China has tried to alter the (perception of the) regional balance of power by conducting its own joint naval exercises with Russia. (In return, China held joint drills with Belarus' land forces in Belarus in July 2024.) Of course, on 4 February 2022, came the now infamous statement that their strategic partnership has 'no limits'. Besides the significant Chinese assistance in reconstituting Russia's armored and missile forces, the absence of direct weapons and ammunition deliveries during the Ukraine War suggests that the partnership has, in fact, 'forbidden areas of cooperation' (under threat of US sanctions). As the powerful 141 votes in the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine showed, today's international community does not readily accept an overt war of aggression.⁸⁴ This holds an obvious lesson for China. China, while explicitly claiming to support Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, abstained in the vote.

How China tries to offset, and in time seeks to supplant, the US military presence within the First Island Chain is described in what in Western terminology is called China's Anti-access/Area denial defense plan (*fan jieru*, counter-intervention, in Mandarin sources). China's publicly available military strategy from 2019, which remained relatively unchanged from 2014 substantively, is clear about what needs protecting: the PLA's stated 'fundamental goal' is 'resolutely defending national sovereignty, security, and development interests'. In other words, Chinese territorial integrity including Taiwan and the East and South China Seas, the US and its alliance system in East Asia, and China's trade and energy routes running through, most vulnerably, the 'choke point' of the Malacca Strait, remain China's main focus in the Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Era. The strategy goes on to explicitly state, 'if someone (the US) wants to split Taiwan from China, the Chinese military will resolutely defeat it at all costs and defend national unity'.⁸⁵ Indeed, strategically, and because of the signature promise the Party has made to the public, 'the core of China's core interests'⁸⁶ remains

⁸¹ Joel Wuthnow, Philip C Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, 'PLA Overseas Operation in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability', *National Defense University*, INSS Strategic Forum (Washington, D.C., May 2021) <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-309.pdf?ver=vBGjBJXsarEsg7nAtEBMBQ%3d%3d>>.

⁸² Department of Defense, 'Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024', (December 2024), 101 <<https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>>.

⁸³ See, for a similar take, Charles Glaser, 'Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism' (2011) 90 *Foreign Affairs* 90 85.

⁸⁴ Note here, though, that a General Assembly vote has no legally binding force. United Nations, 'General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine' (2 March 2022) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>>.

⁸⁵ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'xin shidai de zhongguo guofang' [China's National Defense in the New Era], *Xinhua News Agency* (24 July 2019) <http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm>.

⁸⁶ Chinese Minister of Defense Li Shangfu at the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue, quoted in James Crabtree, 'Rising Taiwan risks cloud improved US-China ties', *The Straits Times* (Singapore, 3 August 3 2023) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/rising-taiwan-risks-cloud-improved-us-china-ties>>.

Taiwan. The reunification of the island with the ‘ancestral land’ (*zuguo*) is, according to Xi, an ‘inevitable requirement’ of national rejuvenation.⁸⁷ Similar as the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan can and has historically been used as a springboard for invasion and has remained de facto independent because of US posturing during the three Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954–1955, 1958, and 1995–1996.

In the current debate about East Asian security, dire warnings about an invasion of Taiwan by 2027 are omnipresent.⁸⁸ A CSIS wargaming exercise projected a Chinese defeat at high cost for both China and the US, and Taiwan.⁸⁹ A Chinese D-Day-like landing would be under fire from Taiwanese mobile missile batteries stationed on the mountainous treetops on the eastern side of the island, and come with extremely vulnerable northern and southern flanks in the Strait for attacks by American manned and unmanned submarine assets. Inevitably, this would come with mass casualties, not to mention the lengthy urban warfare that could ensue. Such a conventional plan would entail a clear risk to popular satisfaction with and the legitimacy of the Party. Xi would have to contend with the prospect of legions of *shidu* parents—parents who lose the one child that they were allowed to have—petitioning on Tiananmen Square.

Instead, the statement that the PLA should have ‘enhanced [its] strategic ability to defend national sovereignty’,⁹⁰ ‘fully enhance training and preparation for war’, should be interpreted as precisely that: Xi demanding military readiness from the PLA to ‘respond to external (US) interference’ (Liu Yantong), ‘crush attempts at Taiwan independence’ (Xu Qiliang).⁹¹ Although clearly more aggressive in its rhetoric, this is not evidence of an intent to invade per se. Next to invitations for a ‘peaceful reunification’, Beijing has always explicitly stated its threat to unite the self-ruled island by force if deemed necessary, most notably in its 2005 Anti-Secession law. The PLA actually having the capacity to do so, and *being seen* as having that capacity, to mean it credibly, strengthens Beijing’s threat vis-à-vis what it calls ‘Taiwan independence separatist forces’ by the likes of Lai Ching-te and his activist Democratic Progressive Party.

Application in Practice: The Indirect Approach

Military and other instruments of power can also be used to advance foreign policy goals short of war through the *indirect approach*.⁹² In contrast to the typical American in-your-face bravura and overt posturing—everything is tailored to, and justified with domestic and allied audiences as, deterrence—an important part of China’s strategy to regain centrality is to achieve political aims without doing battle at all: the classic Sun Tzu circumvention that lies at the heart of Chinese strategic thought. Important methods in this way of war are the ‘three warfares’ (*san zhan*) during peacetime: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. They are designed to ‘weaken the enemy’s

⁸⁷ Philip Wen and Ben Blanchard, ‘Xi warns Taiwan will face “punishment of history” for separatism’, *Reuters* (London, 20 March 2018) <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-parliament-taiwan/xi-warns-taiwan-will-face-punishment-of-history-for-separatism-idUKKBN1GW075506>>; BBC, ‘Xi Jinping says Taiwan “must and will be reunited” with China’ (London, 2 January 2019) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46733174>>.

⁸⁸ See, most prominently, US Pacific Command commander Philip Davidson, quoted in Adela Suliman, ‘China could invade Taiwan in the next 6 years, assume global leadership role, US admiral warns’, *NBC News* (New York, 10 March 2021) <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-could-invade-taiwan-next-6-years-assume-global-leadership-n1260386>>.

⁸⁹ Mark F Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, ‘The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan’, *CSIS* (January 2023) <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>>.

⁹⁰ Chinese Communist Party News Network, ‘zhongguo gongchandang di shijiu jie zhongyang weiyuanhui di wu ci quanti huiyi gongbao’ [Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China] (29 October 2020) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/1029/c64094-31911510.html>>.

⁹¹ Liu Yantong is head of the Central Military Commission’s research bureau; Xu Qiliang, a Xi loyalist, is one of the Commission’s Vice Chairmen under Chairman Xi. Liu Zhen, ‘Chinese top brass say PLA must be on “full-time standby” for war in the Taiwan Strait’, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong, 5 November 2022) <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3198395/chinese-top-brass-say-pla-must-be-full-time-standby-war-taiwan-strait?module=inline&pgtype=article>>.

⁹² Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (Faber and Faber 1954) 335–344; Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (Routledge 2014) 16.

morale and will [to resist]' in the long run⁹³ and can be traced to PLA strategists Qiao and Wang's idea of 'unrestricted warfare' (*chaoxian zhan*).⁹⁴

China's attritional tactics by air, which wear down Taiwanese matériel by forcing Taiwan to scramble its jets to intercept PLA jets, illustrate how this approach works. These moves in the physical domain are employed in tandem with Chinese cognitive warfare operations that amplify doubts among Taiwan's population that the government can and will defend the island in case of war with China. Nested in Taiwanese but also in much-used Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and RedNote (*Xiaohongshu*, literally: little red book), more broadly, Chinese disinformation augments negative sentiments over existing fissures between the conservative KMT and the progressive DPP bases of support, weakening societal cohesion and thus a potential united and cogent Taiwanese response in the future.⁹⁵

Chinese action is initiated with the message that there has been an affront supposedly endangering China's national security. In August 2022, for example, Beijing signaled its displeasure with the visit to Taiwan by US House Speaker Pelosi. According to Beijing, this visit contravened the One China Principle/Policy agreed upon in the Three Communiqués. The Cuban Missile Crisis-like naval blockade around Taiwan that followed, the live-fire drills and ballistic missile launches cutting off Taiwan from air and sea traffic, demonstrated how Beijing could compel Taiwan to relent without a risky amphibious invasion. This intimidation is now executed in some form when Beijing decides that there has been a major infraction by Taiwan, the new status quo. Gradually undercutting Taiwan's popular morale and investment climate, Taiwan is unable to stop it. Western countries, Japan, and South Korea, which do have some material weight and political clout, do not find it in their interest to impose costs on China for normatively unacceptable behavior, as China will impose costs on them for doing so. In March 2021, for example, after the EU tried out its new American-style sanctions instrument on Chinese officials in Xinjiang for gross human rights violations, China imposed counter-sanctions on the very same day.⁹⁶

Importantly, Chinese actions are refined and measured to stay under the UN Charter Article 2(4) threshold of armed conflict as determined by targeted countries. Difficult to attribute to specific Chinese entities, China has been enormously successful in employing its vast cyber warfare capabilities with complete impunity. With the aim to 'preposition for future conflict',⁹⁷ it has targeted US critical civilian infrastructure, such as oil and gas pipelines. It has also obtained sensitive American personnel files from governmental agencies and valuable technological secrets from top defense companies. Overtly, though, Beijing is still somewhat of a 'cautious bully', as Ketian Zhang has detailed.⁹⁸ To forge an image of resolve, China coerces weaker states like the Philippines to deter others from impeding on China's interests. Sealight is an American initiative that tracks these tactical moves, a slower-moving game of maritime attrition where China tries to avoid escalation into war. Chinese actions range from underwater 'surveying' for resources, forward positioning a Chinese presence in disputed waters; to the harassing of Philippine fishermen by swarming them with dozens of tacitly coordinated 'fishing militia'; to the blockading of foreign supply vessels by its coastguard ships; to coastguard water-cannoning, bow-crossing, ramming, and, in February 2023, a laser attack.⁹⁹ Most immediate results have been generated by Chinese sub-sea cable-cutting off Taiwan's Matsu Islands in February 2023 and in the Baltic Sea in

⁹³Sankuk Lee, 'China's "Three Warfares": Origins, Applications, and Organizations' (2014) 37 *Journal of Strategic Studies* 209; Editorial Board, 'renmin ribao bian wei hui: gonggu zhuangda zhuliu sixiang yulun de kexue zhinan' [People's Daily Editorial Board: Scientific guide to consolidate and develop mainstream public opinion], *People's Daily* (Beijing, 30 August 2013) <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0830/c1003-22745794.html>>.

⁹⁴Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, 'chaoxian zhan' [Unrestricted warfare] (PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House 1999).

⁹⁵See, for example, Chihhao Yu, 'US Skepticism Narratives and Where They Comes From', *Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG)* (8 August 2023) <https://iorg.tw/_en/a/us-skepticism-238>.

⁹⁶European Parliament, 'Chinese counter-sanctions on EU targets', (May 2021) <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/690617/EPRS_ATA\(2021\)690617_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/690617/EPRS_ATA(2021)690617_EN.pdf)>.

⁹⁷See, for instance, Ryan Lucas, 'Wray warns Chinese hackers are aiming to "wreak havoc" on U.S. critical infrastructure', *NPR* (Washington, D.C., 31 January 2024) <<https://www.npr.org/2024/01/31/1228153857/wray-chinese-hackers-national-security>>.

⁹⁸Ketian Zhang, 'Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea' (2019) 44 *International Security* 125.

⁹⁹See Sealight, 'Analysis and News', <<https://www.sealight.live/analysis>>.

October 2023 and November 2024. The latter incident occurred five days after Lithuania passed a law prohibiting Chinese access to the control systems of larger solar and wind farms.

Including the maritime operation of commercial activity and the enabling of tacit political influence fits well with PLA strategist Zhang Shiping's comprehensive conception of maritime power (enabled, in turn, by *zonghe guoli*).¹⁰⁰ Here we have arrived at what in the West is known as 'salami slicing', tactics that are intended to create a sense of *fait accompli* over time. This gradual alteration of the facts in the sea has been most visible in the Southeast Asian maritime environment after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. China encircles (*wei*, as in the dynastic era game *weiqi*, or Go) adversaries while paying lip service to the rules of the existing order, coated, if applicable, with Zhou Enlai's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*heping gongchu*). An example of 'rights protection' (*weiquan*) combined with temporary rhetorical placation is provided by the construction and subsequent militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea, contrary to Xi's pledge to Obama in the Rose Garden in 2015. Designed to confuse, Xi ticks off some legal and cooperative terms while reiterating claims that are contradictory in how China practices them. Xi claimed 'Islands in the South China Sea are China's territory since ancient times. We have the right to uphold our own territorial sovereignty and lawful and legitimate maritime rights and interests'. In the subsequent passage, Xi claimed to 'support freedom of navigation and overflight of countries according to international law and the management of differences through dialogue ... and an early conclusion of the consultation of (the still by Beijing stalled) Code of Conduct based on consensus-building'.¹⁰¹ Simply put, while China has said since 2002 that it wants a Code of Conduct with ASEAN countries for safe navigation, it in fact does not. Nor did China want to establish Joe Biden's 'guardrails' for competition because Chinese operational brinkmanship is intended to create a palpable sense of apprehension and risk aversion, compelling a country to either cease or perform specific behavior that is desired by Beijing.¹⁰²

Further, China adds strength to physical maritime moves through 'lawfare'. China works to make the South China Sea an inner lake where, under Beijing's interpretation of freedom of navigation, US and allied military vessels and planes need permission to operate. At present, this kind of coastal state authority exists only within 12 nautical miles from a nation's shore. This parallel 'Chinese law of the sea' has been covered well by Isaac Kardon¹⁰³ and is in contravention of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, ratified by more than 160 states, including China (but not the US), as well as long-established customary international law on the freedoms that apply on the high seas. Hugo de Groot, the Western thinker who is better known as 'Grotius', first articulated its foundations in 1609 at a time of European global expansion. In 2016, the South China Sea Arbitration case ruling handed down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration invalidated China's history-based 'nine-dash line' claim over the maritime area that covers nearly the whole South China Sea. Yet, besides narrative value for the Philippines, this win had little effect because the court has no enforcement mechanisms. Of course, in CCP legalist (*fajia*) thinking, there is no such thing as an objectively, independently arrived at rule of law. There is only Han Fei's rule *by law* (*yifa zhiguo*): those with political power (*shi*) decide the interpretative outcome, through which society (international order) is governed.¹⁰⁴ A Marxist lens would see international law as a Western mechanism that propagates the 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie'. China, synthesizing these Marxist elements with its own 'Sinic' notions, would see liberal institutions such as international courts as a means to maintain Western capitalist interests and sustain its international systemic dominance over China. In revising the order, this Western 'tool' must be struggled against (*douzheng*), although given the relative power balance, prudently for now. In any case, a bilateral or multilateral agreement, treaty, or contract is just

¹⁰⁰See Zhang Shiping, of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, in *zhongguo haiquan* [Chinese Seapower] (People's Daily Press 1998).

¹⁰¹The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in Joint Press Conference', (25 September 2015) <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>>.

¹⁰²See Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Frederick A. Praeger 1965) chap. 2.

¹⁰³Isaac B Kardon, *China's Law of the Sea: The New of Maritime order* (Yale University Press 2023).

¹⁰⁴Chung-ying Cheng, 'Understanding Legalism in Chinese Philosophy' (2011) 38 *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2.

a piece of paper. The degree to which Chinese officials and corporations abide by such promises depends on the likelihood that they can get away with non-adherence that favors them.

As Fairbank has theorized for China's imperial system, in managing relations with foreigners, there has always been an important role reserved for cultural (and religious) 'attraction'.¹⁰⁵ With Xi reverting back to a full embrace of Selznick's *Organizational Weapon*,¹⁰⁶ the role of influencing important foreigners and organizations has again been emphasized. Often, these targets already have an ideological or identity affinity with China, such as the descendants of the Kuomintang soldiers and administrators who fled to Taiwan after the nationalists' loss to the communists in 1949. First, there are the benign-looking soft power agents of the state operating abroad, such as the Confucius Institutes for culture, or China Daily and the CGTN television network as part of Xi's 'publicity fronts' for 'good news about China' propaganda. Advancing an alternate reality, they promote a Sino-Marxist worldview where China supposedly has a 'whole-process people's democracy' (*quan guocheng renmin minzhu*) and ostensibly offers 'indivisible' (as opposed to the US alliance-based) security as per its Global Security Initiative (*quanqiu anquan changyi*).¹⁰⁷ Propaganda outlets also try to boost the voice of fellow travelers that they portray as an 'old friend of China' (*zhongguo (renmin)de lao pengyou*).¹⁰⁸ More sinister and directly dangerous, clandestine cyber and Ministry of Public Security and United Front Work Department influence operations are deployed to weaken, discredit, and intimidate (potential) pockets of resistance. Two examples from the Netherlands in the fall of 2022 can be mentioned: two illegal Chinese police stations from which coercive agents operated were discovered¹⁰⁹; and critical Dutch journalist Marije Vlackamp was intimidated to drop a story she was working on. This occurred not in China, where this happens all the time, but abroad, and involved a Chinese dissident who himself was being intimidated.¹¹⁰

Application in Practice: Economic, Institutional, and Diplomatic Approaches

Just as the US Monroe Doctrine was enforced from the early 19th century with more than just military posturing, China too leverages its relative material power. In the globalized, interconnected world of today, China tacitly wields its leverage from built-up economic dependencies against external challenges that it is confronted with. At a minimum, it induces states to acquiesce to Beijing's dealings. Given the military balance of forces between China and perhaps North Korea and Russia, and the US, Japan, and South Korea, what can be called the 'Finlandization' of weaker states will remain China's principal long-term approach to regain regional primacy. If we take the ICJ's non-intervention definition, Finlandization can be defined as bringing a country into a state where it has lost its autonomy to determine its own foreign policy. Fairbank, with respect to imperial times, would label this as trade and commerce manipulation.¹¹¹ Examples of various degrees of Finlandization include Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Malaysia under Najib Razak, and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, although the latter two arguably saw their deference to Beijing as part of their hedging strategy.

¹⁰⁵ John King Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press 1973) 12–13.

¹⁰⁶ Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (Quid Pro Books 2014) 19.

¹⁰⁷ See, for the latter propaganda narrative, Xi Jinping, 'xi jinning zai bo'ao yazhou luntan 2022 nian nian hui kaimu shi shang de zhuzhi yanjiang (quanwen)' [Keynote speech by Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia 2022 (full text)], *People's Daily* (Beijing, 21 April 2022) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0421/c64094-32405039.html>>.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Martin Jacques, 'Why there has been an overwhelming failure to understand CPC in West: Martin Jacques', *Global Times* (Beijing, 6 April 2021) <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220314.shtml>>.

¹⁰⁹ Nina dos Santos, 'Exclusive: China operating over 100 police stations across the world with the help of some host nations, report claims', *CNN* (Atlanta, 4 December 2022) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/04/world/china-overseas-police-stations-intl-cmd/index.html>>.

¹¹⁰ Marije Vlackamp, 'How a Volkskrant-reporter became the target of Chinese intimidation', *Volkskrant* (Amsterdam, 8 April 2023) <<https://www.volkskrant.nl/kijkverder/v/2023/how-a-volkskrant-reporter-became-the-target-of-chinese-intimidation~v691100/>>>.

¹¹¹ Fairbank, *Chinese World Order*, 12–13.

Cambodia is the most complete case of Finlandization that we can review, where economic dependency has created decisive diplomatic heft. In Cambodia today, there are areas such as the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone where the businesses, the language, and even the money used are Chinese. This economic penetration has cascading effects on China's military grip on Southeast Asia as well. Twenty kilometers south along the coast from Sihanoukville, at the Chinese-built facilities of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, two Chinese naval vessels have been docked throughout 2024.¹¹² In the Gulf of Thailand, the base provides a flanking strike opportunity into the southern part of the South China Sea, where ships navigate toward and from the Malacca Strait. (Adding a land component in Cambodia would provide rear positioning and defense intelligence access to perennially recalcitrant Vietnam).

China goes to great lengths to ensure that smaller nations are kept atomized and unable to ally against it. Instead, it prefers to employ its vastly unequal material power and accompanying diplomatic sway in dealing with individual nations bilaterally. It rather plays countries out against each other than go through, for instance, ASEAN. Already in July 2012, Chinese diplomats, by working Cambodian officials outside of the meeting room, prevented a joint statement on Chinese maritime encroachment from coming out of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting held in Phnom Penh.¹¹³ The Chinese embassy in Cambodia issued a statement at 9 a.m. of the day of the official planned meeting that Chinese delegates had already had 'informal' conversations with 'senior officials from ASEAN countries' the day before 'in preparation'.¹¹⁴ The statement said that together, the Chinese diplomats and their unspecified counterparts 'underlined [their] commitment to continued implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea'.¹¹⁵ As this agreement had not been implemented in the decade prior, this was likely a veiled threat to continue going along with China's stalling tactic. China keeps certain issues of import to others on the table, and the negotiation process going, without preconditions or an end state. It does this for the sake of keeping relations favorable and thus conducive to the material interests that China has with those countries. In the case of ASEAN, this keeps it divided as a bloc so that China is free to proceed with its under-the-radar ground game.

Whereas the Cambodian example relates to foreign direct investment, many other countries are bound to China by trade, which leads us to the 'Xinjiang issue' (quotations typically in official Chinese correspondence to convey that it is a fabricated issue) and a rare public declaration of loyalty (*biaotai*). In July 2019, Beijing assembled 37 countries to write a letter to the UN Human Rights Council opposing an earlier letter to that body consisting of 22 mostly Western countries condemning China's arbitrary detention, surveillance, and restriction of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. The rallied countries were mostly authoritarian states from the so-called 'like-minded group of developing countries'.¹¹⁶ As for East Asian countries, North Korea, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines were signatories. Illustrative of China's leverage, all Muslim-majority nations, including powerhouse Saudi Arabia, either signed the pro-China letter or stayed silent on China's repression of Muslim minorities in China.¹¹⁷

What does this economic leveraging look like when China deals with stronger countries, or those within a bloc or alliance that are less easily coerced? We can think of the consumer boycott of South

¹¹²Jonathan Head, 'Does China now have a permanent military base in Cambodia?', *BBC* (London, 8 October 2024) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2k42n54kvo>>.

¹¹³Ernest Bower, 'China Reveals Its Hand on ASEAN in Phnom Penh', *CSIS* (20 July 2012) <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-reveals-its-hand-asean-phnom-penh>>.

¹¹⁴Chinese Embassy in Cambodia, 'Senior Officials from China and ASEAN Met in Phnom Penh' (9 July 2012) <http://sl.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/201207/t20120709_5857956.htm>.

¹¹⁵*ibid.*

¹¹⁶Roie Yellinek and Elizabeth Chen, 'The 22 vs. 50 Diplomatic Split Between the West and China Over Xinjiang and Human Rights', *Jamestown Foundation*, China Brief 19 (31 December 2019) <<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Read-the-12-31-2019-CB-Issue-in-PDF.pdf>>.

¹¹⁷Human Rights Watch, 'Joint counterstatement Xinjiang', (12 July 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/190712_joint_counterstatement_xinjiang.pdf>.

Korean products, investments, and holiday destinations, at least encouraged by the Party-state after South Korea accepted the US THAAD missile defense system in 2016. In Europe, a similar punitive measure of compellence was taken against Lithuania over allowing the change of 'Taipei' to 'Taiwan' Representative Office in 2021. Then there are the examples of the halting of the export of processed rare earth elements. China holds an overwhelming global share in these elements crucial for the green transition and chip manufacturing, such as the element germanium, due to the huge environmental cost that goes with extraction and processing. China banned export to Japan in September 2010 after the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands fishing trawler incident, to Europe in August 2023 after the Netherlands yielded to US pressure to further limit the export to China of ASML's highest-end chip-making machines, and to the US in the twilight of the Biden administration in December 2024 after it enacted yet further restrictions on chip and machine sales to China (admittedly, the last example is more retaliatory than leveraging given US power). From April into the summer of 2025, China enforced export restrictions on so-called 'heavy' rare earth elements that are crucial for the production of Western advanced weaponry such as the F-35 and the Tomahawk missile. In 2023, China processed 99% of the world's heavy rare earth minerals.¹¹⁸

The main banner under which foreign direct investment is brought is the Belt & Road Initiative, worth around 200 billion dollars annually.¹¹⁹ Apart from achieving geoeconomic goals, they are naturally also meant to benefit the Chinese economy: a continued domestic goal of Chinese foreign policy. China sends its state-owned enterprises and workforce overseas, exports Chinese industrial overcapacity, and finances this via its state banks that hold large overseas foreign currency reserves.¹²⁰ Clearly, this standing practice operates in opposition to Western private capitalist practice and the IMF/World Bank Bretton Woods system. Here, according to China, there ought to be 'common development' on the basis of value-free 'mutual respect' (*xianghu zunzhong*); that is, without Washington Consensus preconditions with respect to rule of law, human rights, and good governance.

Another driver of 'going out' (*zou chuqu*, a Hu Jintao era slogan) is the fostering of 'comprehensively deepening reform' toward an innovative, consumer demand-driven economy.¹²¹ For the broader West, the prospect of huge profits that can be earned in the world's largest consumer market has been the primary motivator of its engagement with China since Great Britain, France, the US, and other great powers forced an 'Open Door' to the country in the 19th century. The West's Achilles' heel is, to use the words of a former British Prime Minister, capitalist greed (and lax liberal economic regulations). Typically, a big multinational firm like the American Tesla has factories in China. This facilitates not only cheaper production but also reduces China's significant (non-tariff) trade barriers. There has not been and will never be an even playing field due to the very nature of the Chinese development model. Yet, investments in China come with forced technology transfer and obligatory co-ownership with a local company that must own 51% of the shares, which follows Party plans, and has mandatory Party cells on the executive board.

The narrow, short-term profit-driven interest of the Western shareholder class has also been skillfully exploited, such as with the hostile Party-state takeovers of Western high-tech companies that took off with the acquisition of German robotics maker Kuka in 2016. Together with the vast, wide-ranging, and systematic theft of American and European intellectual property through cyber means, China Scholarship Council-funded postgraduate students in Western STEM institutions, and

¹¹⁸Gracelin Baskaran and Meredith Schwartz, 'The Consequences of China's New Rare Earths Export Restrictions', *CSIS* (14 April 2025) <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/consequences-chinas-new-rare-earths-export-restrictions>>; Jon Emont, Heather Somerville, Alistair MacDonald, 'China Is Choking Supply of Critical Minerals to Western Defense Companies', *Wall Street Journal* (New York, 3 August 2025) <<https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/china-western-defense-industry-critical-minerals-3971ec51>>.

¹¹⁹Matthew Mingey and Agatha Kratz, 'China's Belt and Road: Down but not Out', *Rhodium Group* (4 January 2021) <<https://rhg.com/research/bri-down-out/>>.

¹²⁰This has not been held back by China's post-financial crisis debt gorging, which has put China's own total debt-to-GDP ratio over 300%.

¹²¹Yang, 'Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy'.

highly skilled expats, China's knowledge heist has been the most successful prong in China's effort to leapfrog its competitors in the global value chain and, with it, shift the global balance of power (*guoji geju*) without a shot fired. In the words of Xi: 'advanced technology is the sharp weapon of the modern state',¹²² which logically connects with Deng Xiaoping's military-civil fusion dictum: 'combine the military and the civil, combine peacetime with wartime, prioritize military products, let the civilian sector support the military sector' (*junmin jiehe ping zhan jiehe junpin youxian yi min yang jun*).¹²³

Finally, diplomatically, China is pragmatic, willing to compromise, only as long as the power distribution dictates it. The US, and to a lesser extent Japan, have to be dealt with in this more prudent manner. Examples of this transactional way are the drawn-out negotiations leading to the partial US-China 'Phase One' trade deal agreed in January 2020, and the EU-China foreign investment deal signed in December 2020 under pressure from the new Biden administration coming into office. China is also a willing partner when interests roughly align with Beijing's; think, for instance, of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade deal signed in November 2020. The collapse of domestic support for Obama's signature geoeconomic strategy, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, has been a significant American loss in this regard. Japan-led, it is now in effect as TPP11. When it does not concern China's sovereignty and territorial integrity principle, China will continue to diplomatically engage with multilateral institutions such as the UN. In these forums, China will proclaim the international status quo, Peaceful Development language while sometimes doing the exact opposite in practice. A brazen narrative example in the financial-economic sphere, which was blindly copied by established Western journalists, was Xi's mercantilist China advocating for open markets and free trade in Davos in 2017—markets open to *China*.¹²⁴

China, instrumentally, not substantively nor in spirit, will continue to abide by most of the rules of the current liberal order while operating in the 'gray zone' to alter them. An example of this gradual abiding practice is the way China, having a state-led market economy, successfully navigates the WTO trade system through what Seung-Youn Oh calls 'convenient compliance'. Oh's study analyzes two cases on the auto and wind turbine industries, cases brought before the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body by the US, and the US and EU together, respectively. Oh details how these industries are unfairly advantaged with large Chinese state subsidies. Because the reviewing process sometimes takes years, by the time the Body comes with a ruling, China simply withdraws the subsidy, having achieved its aim of launching a domestic champion.¹²⁵ In the words of Xi in a 2022 speech before the new Central Committee: 'once our strategy is set, we must stick to it in the long term and not change it arbitrarily. We must follow it in principle while showing tactical flexibility'.¹²⁶

Lastly, China has shown a profound desire to reform existing liberal international institutional frameworks and build parallel ones,¹²⁷ such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China and the US also compete and challenge each other in contested spaces, as occurred in the developing world during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. For instance, together with the other G7 countries, the US has proposed a 'Build Back Better' plan supposedly able to counter Xi's vast Belt & Road funds. However, apart from long-

¹²²Chris Buckley and Paul Mozur, 'What Keeps Xi Jinping Awake at Night', *New York Times* (11 May 2018) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-national-security.html>>.

¹²³Quoted in John Frankenstein, 'China's Defense Industries: A New Course?' In James C Mulvenon and Richard H Yang (eds), *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age* (RAND 1999) 208.

¹²⁴See, for example, Jamil Anderlini, Wang Feng, and Tom Mitchell, 'Xi Jinping delivers robust defence at Davos for globalisation', *Financial Times* (London, 17 January 2017) <<https://www.ft.com/content/67ec2ec0-dca2-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce>>.

¹²⁵Seung-Youn Oh, 'Convenient Compliance: China's Industrial Policy Staying One Step Ahead of WTO Enforcement', *East Asia Institute* (May 2015) <<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191745/13.05.2015.pdf>>.

¹²⁶John Erling, 'Xi's Chinese-style modernization: tactical flexibility and ideological steadfastness', *MERICs* (20 February 2023) <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/xis-chinese-style-modernization-tactical-flexibility-and-ideological-steadfastness#msdynttrid=OLg3v0wqNo3ZqkYcMPWXI9k3gli7T6XGI_LEMnhNbSU>.

¹²⁷Joel Wuthnow, Xin Li, and Lingling Qi, 'Diverse Multilateralism: Four Strategies in China's Multilateral Diplomacy' (2012) 17 *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 269–290.

standing developmental efforts such as USAID, thus far, the developing world has been left to China relatively uncontested. With China's integration into the global economy, contested spaces are mostly transnational and located in high-tech, trade, and supply lines, and over the global commons.

Conclusion

Applying Tsang's theory of Chinese foreign policy, the above has elaborated how Xi's 'Sinic' doctrine can help explain Chinese praxis today. To make the US regional position untenable and break its 'all-round containment' of China, China has set out to build up an overwhelming predominance in its conventional and nuclear force structure. Eventually, by 2049, this *fan jieru* offset plan must have forced the US toward retrenchment. Taiwan, however, has been a good example to illustrate how, by being perceived as possessing the capabilities needed, China can win without having to initiate a high-intensity war in the Taiwan Strait. Unless Taiwan declares independence, the outbreak of a hot war between China and the US would likely pertain to China sticking to its claims of 'indisputable sovereignty' over the South China Sea. In this scenario, after an accident, miscommunication, or confrontation at sea with the Philippines, China feels backed into a corner by its nationalistic public and decides to escalate, triggering US alliance commitments.

As long as the US remains anchored in the region, and thus China's principal enemy, Beijing is forced to use more subtle, longer-term means and ways to gradually increase its influence over neighbors. In doing so, China casts itself as a benign, paternalistic guarantor of regional peace and stability for Asian states in line with Xi's 'Asia for Asians' speech at the 2014 Boao Forum. Most visibly, China has sought to create strategic depth vis-à-vis American forces stationed in the region by expanding its de facto control over disputed maritime territories. China has done so while glossing over these slower-moving attritional tactics with its own legalistic and moral notions of fairness, advancing the Marxist nationalist contestations encapsulated in Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy. What is more, psychological and public opinion warfare, United Front Work Department operations, and lawfare are all indirect methods that are employed *in conjunction with* conventional moves in the overt physical realm. In setting an example, China has notably focused its resources on bullying a weak state like the Philippines instead of taking on the more capable Japanese Self-Defense forces in the East China Sea, which is similarly in part claimed by China.

Toward weaker countries such as Cambodia, but also toward a middle power like South Korea, China, if it feels compelled to, wields the economic leverage that it has built up: the Chinese equivalent of the American military 'show of force'. By making countries dependent on China's goodwill, and acknowledging China's regional suzerainty, China tries to tilt the 'US for security' versus 'China for economics' balance that its neighbors have tried to maintain toward picking China's side. In time, such integration with China's political economy may break American commercial access to the region. When interests align, or when the relative power equation demands it, China can be transactional bilaterally. Multilaterally, China will continue to play by the liberal rules of the existing order, though mostly instrumentally in form rather than in substance. Seung-Youn Oh's 'convenient compliance' is the blueprint here.

Assuming China's economic 'new normal' can sustain China's material rise in the region relative to the US, and therefore its naval, air, and rocket force buildup can continue unabated, the 'essential characteristics'¹²⁸ of the current liberal order are unlikely to survive this period of transition. In this unstable and progressively unviable region, for the US, the West, and non-compliant East Asian nations such as Singapore, it will steadily become more difficult to invest and trade freely, navigate the waters unobstructed, and advocate for liberal internationalist values outside one's own borders freely. Needless to say, China's great power aspiration for a sphere of influence in its neighborhood is by no means unique to China: the US and its Monroe Doctrine, and the Soviet Union with the satellite buffer states of the Warsaw Pact are just two examples of the desire for (preventative) security, and status.

¹²⁸Deutsch and Singer, 'Multipolar Power Systems', 390.

Declaration

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Disclosure Statement

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Data Availability Statement

The data used in this research were derived from publicly available sources.