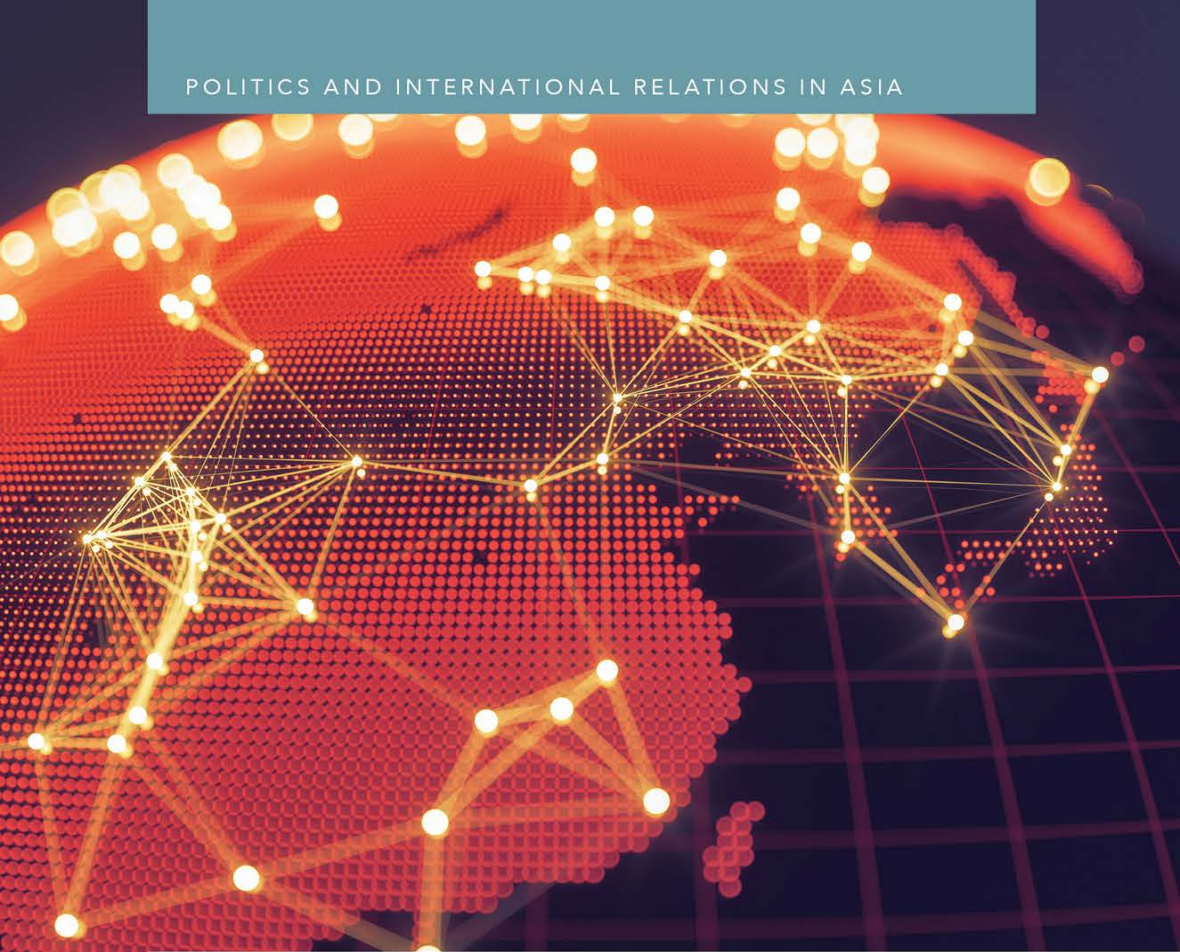




POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN ASIA

Edited by Courtney J. Fung, Enze Han, Kai Quek, and Austin Strange

# Conditioning China's Influence

Intentionality, Intermediaries,  
and Institutions



# Conditioning China's Influence

This edited volume contributes to debates about China's influence, and explores three specific themes in the context of global China: the effects of (un)intentional influence and influence externalities; the role of intermediaries, the sub-state, and non-state actors that are conduits for influence; and the conditioning effects of host country institutions.

The work advances conversation of public and academic interest by problematizing existing conceptualizations of China's influence and offering a fresh approach. Existing research has paid surprisingly little systematic attention to how local, national, and global factors outside of China—and beyond its control—condition whether and how China's investments in global influence bear fruit. A central claim of the book is that scholars need to pay more careful attention to how these external factors create unexpected consequences for influence-seeking states. This book explores three specific themes in the context of global China: the effects of (un)intentional influence and influence externalities; the role of intermediaries, the sub-state, and non-state actors that are conduits for influence; and the conditioning effects of host country institutions.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of Asian Studies, Politics, Regional Studies, and International Relations.

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#### **Conditioning China's Influence**

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# **Conditioning China's Influence**

Intentionality, Intermediaries, and Institutions

**Edited by Courtney J. Fung, Enze Han,  
Kai Quek, and Austin Strange**

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## **Part I**

# **Introduction**



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# Introduction

## Conditioning China's Influence: Intentionality, Intermediaries, and Institutions<sup>1</sup>

*Courtney J. Fung, Enze Han, Kai Quek, and Austin Strange*

### Introduction

According to conventional wisdom among policymakers, journalists, and pundits, China's international influence appears to be taking effect in a multitude of domains within China's immediate neighborhood and further afield, on issues ranging from vaccines to drone sales to smart city development.<sup>2</sup> International relations scholars, however, have been more cautious, and a growing body of literature challenges popular claims of China's influence. Theoretically informed studies separate measures of China's power from measures of its influence, repeatedly illustrating that the former does not necessarily translate into the latter.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have considered the questions of how to understand, conceptualize, and measure China's influence, discussing whether China's influence is congruent with its material power in various domains, and if there is a discrepancy, why? We lay out a summary of the literature here and, building on these earlier efforts, offer three new avenues for researchers to consider how China's purported influence can be more effectively studied and understood. These avenues include influences that accrue unintentionally, the role of sub-state actors and other intermediaries in Chinese influence generation, and the conditioning effect of host country institutions. Attention to these channels can help balance debates on Chinese influence, which traditionally emphasize China's own aims and actions, toward environmental factors often outside of China's direct reach that nonetheless condition its influence bottom line.

According to a classic definition in political science, influence is 'a relation among actors in which one actor induces other actors to act in some way they would not otherwise act.'<sup>4</sup> Specifically, it is 'a relation among human actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors in a direction consistent with – and not contrary to – the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders.'<sup>5</sup> Common mechanisms of influence include inducement (via rewards), coercion (via force or the threat of force), and communication (via persuasion or deceit).<sup>6</sup>

As such, understanding influence requires knowledge of what the influence-seeker wants. Gauging a rising China's intentions has been a major research agenda in international relations for the past three decades. At a systemic level, whether China is a status quo or revisionist power remains a contentious debate.<sup>7</sup>

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Scholars have also sought to understand China's specific aims regarding military modernization,<sup>8</sup> the United Nations and international institutions,<sup>9</sup> the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its more recent suite of additional Global Initiatives,<sup>10</sup> and aid and lending to developing countries,<sup>11</sup> for example.

Thus far, much of the study of China's global influence has been an extension of this research, in the sense that scholars have mostly focused on the questions of whether and how China can leverage its growing material capabilities to secure its objectives. Within this literature, most studies focus on instances in which influence-seeking is intentionally orchestrated by China's government. This research usually assumes that China's behavior is focused on specific targets, most often other states and their policies.<sup>12</sup> In perhaps the most comprehensive account of Chinese influence, China is the 'influence-wielder' and its various target actors are typified as states or multilateral bodies. In this account, China's foreign influence has 'three discernible components':<sup>13</sup>

- Causality: where the influence-wielder is in a causal relationship with a target actor;
- Intentionality: when the influence-wielder executes purposive behavior toward the target actor;
- Gradations of goal attainment: outcomes are 'in a direction consistent with... the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders.'<sup>14</sup>

An influence-wielder can use different strategies depending on how its preferences match with those of the target state.<sup>15</sup> When existing preferences are aligned, the influencer can 'exploit structural position for mutual benefit.' When extant preferences are undecided or mixed, the influencer can use persuasion to 'tell the better story' or use institutional shaping to 'set the agenda, make or change norms to constrain others.' When preferences are opposed, the influencer can impose its power to prevail.

An empirical observation of this treatment of influence should demonstrate that the influence-wielder, in this case China, intentionally causes the target's behavior so as to advance the preferences of the People's Republic of China (PRC). 'Easy' observations are those where China and the target's initial preferences differ, and China can prevail by one of three main tools of coercion,<sup>16</sup> inducement,<sup>17</sup> or persuasion.<sup>18</sup> More difficult observations will show some initial overlap of intentions within the dyad, so teasing out the direction of influence and the actual variation from initial interests is key. Other earlier research on China's influence acknowledges future research avenues that can identify 'key variables and mechanisms determining target states' responses to China's attempts at influence.'<sup>19</sup> Suggestions have included further identification and operationalization of explanatory variables, inductive theory-building to explain the influence behavior of other influence-wielding states beyond China, and the prescriptive value of theory.<sup>20</sup>

These previous approaches provide a valuable foundation for the study of Chinese influence and can apply to a wide range of Chinese foreign policy behaviors.<sup>21</sup> However, deliberate actions directed by China's government are hardly the

full spectrum of activities that shape China's influence 'bottom line.' Moreover, intense focus on state-led, highly targeted efforts has arguably marginalized less straightforward (but no less consequential) channels through which influence can accrue or dissipate. Our overarching approach in this chapter is to build off this earlier work by advancing a more inclusive concept of influence and discussing how it can apply to more accurately understand Chinese influence around the world. We believe that such an approach can conceptually and empirically expand the range of relevant phenomena for understanding whether and how China's influence is accumulating in different areas of international relations.

Inclusivity here refers to a few specific adjustments. First, our strategy for understanding influence is not bound to analyzing state-driven behavior. Instead, it emphasizes that, while statist approaches are an essential point of departure, a plurality of state and non-state actors – both within and outside the influence-wielder state – behave in ways that can change an influence-wielder's aggregate influence. Second, while earlier research has primarily focused on dyadic situations involving an influence-wielder and influence target, many other scenarios also exist in which an influence-wielder's overall level of influence can change more diffusely. As such, we do not limit our focus on influence-related activities to dyadic situations, much less to scenarios involving one influence-wielding and one target government. Third, we reinforce a point made by others and treat influence as a net concept wherein influence outcomes depend on reactions of others, not simply efforts made by an influence-wielder. In other words, influence does not increase by default and can just as easily decrease, meaning certain behaviors can result in net negative levels of influence. While we stop short of proposing an alternative definition for influence, this inclusive approach can help future research account for important blind spots in the study of China's evolving international influence.

This outlook leaves us with three main areas to excavate. The first is the assumption of intentionality to cause behavioral change in the target and therefore advance PRC preferences. States may accumulate influence beyond their directed goals, with these accumulations of unforeseen influence useful or costly for other foreign policy activities. Network-based approaches to international politics explicate how unforeseen influence nodes can be 'weaponized' in global governance.<sup>22</sup> While these state-directed accumulations of influence have generated major research interest, we shift the focus to 'influence externalities,' or when influence beyond the state's objectives 'occur unintentionally and independently of the state's objectives due to changes in behavior or perceptions by foreign state or non-state actors.'<sup>23</sup> For example, politicization of China's increasingly global reach and public concern about 'foreign actors' has led to renewed interest in 'PRC influence operations' even when compelling evidence of China's express involvement is sometimes murky.<sup>24</sup> Problematizing the assumption of intentionality as a core component of influence enables research to probe how 'influence externalities' are understood, which sets of actors participate to create such perceptions, and how such unintended consequences can be measured. Such research highlights previously understudied actors, pathways, and consequences of such reflexively identified 'Chinese influence,' even when PRC-initiated activity is unclear at best



– leading to diverse conclusions of what exactly PRC influence is without intentional involvement by China.

Second, existing studies focus on asymmetric dyads, with China as the more powerful, unified influence-wielder. However, this assumption can be challenged also by opening up the ‘black box’ of state-to-state interaction, examining party-level, sub-state, and even non-state connectivity. Indeed, research points to China’s focus on creating inductive environments in target states through elite visits, party-to-party dialogues, cadre professionalization trainings, cultural exchanges, and foreign-oriented propaganda, which are all efforts that better prepare foreign environments to receive China, while not sparking popular outcry.<sup>25</sup> By problematizing the unitary actor assumption, research here encourages us to consider actor designation and the definition of goal attainment when there is a myriad of players involved, each with their own preferences and intentions. Other works note the informal, individually elected, self-directed efforts that may not intend to influence but are categorized into ‘PRC influence’ nonetheless.<sup>26</sup>

Third, recent research clearly demonstrates how other states’ domestic institutions affect China’s international influence, in shaping which host-country actors’ interests count and how those interests count.<sup>27</sup> Host country institutions condition both state-directed and other potential activities of consequence for China’s net influence. In particular, they shape whether and how the behavior of different Chinese actors, as well as reactions and perceptions toward these behaviors by groups and individuals in the host environment, are included in the domestic aggregation of societal preferences within the host country.

As evidenced by the chapters in the edited volume, China’s growing array of economic and political activities around the world complicates traditional approaches to conceptualizing influence. In addition to direct influence attempts, the focus of much of the existing literature, more systematic attention is needed to understand other sources that contribute to (or detract from) China’s net influence. In the remainder of this chapter, we probe these new directions by discussing influence intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions in turn. These ‘Three I’s’ of intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions constitute interrelated blind spots in the study of Chinese influence, and this volume is structured around unpacking each of them. We aim to distill existing evidence and position each of these factors as pathways for future research. A conclusion section then introduces the rest of the edited volume and suggests avenues for future research.

### **Intentionality**

Actor intent is notoriously difficult to study in international relations, and identifying influence that accrues *absent* such intent is likely difficult for the same basic reason: actors’ true motives (or lack thereof) are unobservable.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, influence that accrues unintentionally may constitute an underappreciated component of China’s overall influence equation.<sup>29</sup> As such, conceptually clarifying some of the ways in which governments such as China can inadvertently gain or lose influence is an important first step.

Political scientists have long suggested that some sources of power and influence are unintended.<sup>30</sup> The notion that China may generate influence unintentionally is similarly well-documented by existing studies.<sup>31</sup> But how and under what circumstances does this occur? The notion of ‘influence externalities’ offers one approach for thinking about these questions. Influence externalities refer to shifts in other states’ policies or in foreign public opinion towards a government resulting from activities of state, quasi-state, or non-state actors abroad not directed by the influence-seeking state.<sup>32</sup> Much like externalities in economic theory, influence externalities are unintended side effects for influence-seeking governments created by changes in others’ behavior or attitudes. As such, rather than a proactive initiator, the influence-seeking state is effectively a third party when influence externalities occur. In addition to a lack of influence-seeker government intent, by definition, influence externalities are not directed at specific targets.<sup>33</sup> To demonstrate and clarify the concept, we discuss three important aspects of influence externalities: their origins; channels through which they impact China’s influence; and the extent of their spread.

One source of unintended influence well-documented by existing studies is when an influence-seeking government delegates responsibilities to quasi- or non-state agents that act in ways incongruent with the objectives of the state.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Chinese foreign policy, one well-known example is profit-driven state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating abroad under macro-level state directives such as the ‘Going Out’ strategy or BRI intended to achieve a diverse menu of national economic and political objectives.

A second source of influence externalities stems not from Chinese agents but from reactions of elite or popular foreign actors. In particular, influence externalities can occur when these actors *misattribute* the behavior or identities of quasi- or non-state Chinese actors – whether firms, organizations, employees, students, members of diaspora populations, or otherwise – to China’s government, and when this misattribution results in shifts of foreign behavior or perceptions toward China’s government. Put another way, positive or negative unintentional influence can accrue because groups or individuals in other countries possess incomplete information – or the incentive to misrepresent accurate information – regarding the identities, motives, and roles of different actors from the influence-seeker state.

Examples of such misattribution are ubiquitous. Consider a private Chinese company that makes a large investment in a foreign country without mandate or support from the Chinese government, and whose company-specific labor practices result in local negative sentiment. Then suppose local workers misattribute the firm’s behavior as a broader ploy used by ‘China’ to exploit other countries for its own benefit, and that bottom-up public sentiment results in heightened political salience of China in national discourse, as well as greater government scrutiny and tougher investment policies toward China. Alternatively, suppose the same company’s investment brings fair wages and an improvement in local economic conditions, and local citizens’ incomplete information about the firm’s true identity results in a misplaced credit to China’s government. Such misattribution occurs regularly in the context of Chinese overseas investment. For example, Chinese

mining firms in Peru are often seen as being linked to China's government regardless of their status as state-owned or private companies.<sup>35</sup> Confusion between state and non-state actors is certainly not a unique issue for China. But misattribution is arguably most consequential for the net influence of countries like China whose government agencies and firms often lack transparency and whose development strategy prescribes the co-presence of a complex set of state and non-state actors abroad.

Influence externalities can affect China's net influence in different ways. For example, they can exert bottom-up pressure via changes in host country public sentiment that affect the strategic interests of China's government. Many recent examples of this process have tended to be influence-diminishing. For instance, consider the BRI, one of Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy initiatives, wherein Chinese-financed projects have occasionally been suspended, mothballed, or canceled in the face of pressure on host country governments applied by local residents, civil society organizations, and local officials. An illustrative example of this pressure occurred around a Chinese-financed, coal-fired power plant in Lamu, Kenya, that was ultimately denied a license and effectively shut down in 2019 after local communities concerned with environmental damage campaigned against the plant for three years.<sup>36</sup> In Zambia, workers, civil society actors, and other local stakeholders have shaped national policies toward Chinese investment by tactfully framing grievances as national issues and enhancing their bargaining power.<sup>37</sup> A more well-known instance occurred when Malaysia's then-Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, temporarily canceled over \$20 billion in projects previously signed by his predecessor, Najib Razak, after the projects became associated with highly public corruption scandals and associated with mounting strategic debt to China.<sup>38</sup>

Alternatively, influence externalities provide opportunities for host country elites to capitalize on negative popular sentiment towards China – even if such sentiment stems from the behavior of non-state actors from the influence-seeking state – and achieve bargaining advantages that jeopardize China's influence. Indonesia's recent negotiations on the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway and other BRI projects offer an example of this dynamic.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that negative public sentiment invariably damages China's overseas influence. For example, growing anti-China sentiment in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries has not significantly undermined China's political influence in the region, which runs through local and national politicians.<sup>40</sup> This reflects, as we discuss below, the central role of host country institutions in dictating when, where, and the extent to which both intentional influence and influence externalities accrue.

Beyond public opinion, activities of Chinese quasi- and non-state actors abroad can generate influence externalities at various higher and lower levels of politics. In many countries, large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects have become major political bargaining chips between different political actors. For instance, Aung San Suu Kyi's strong political support base in 2016 alleviated the need for Myanmar's

government to shun Chinese projects and helps explain greater engagement with the BRI.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, the behavior of Chinese firms can create incentives for host country actors to behave in ways that run counter to China's preferences. For example, drawing on alliances with Filipino government officials and industry leaders, the rise of online gambling in the Philippines, fueled in part by private Chinese company investments – a phenomenon explored by Yeo and Gloria later in this edited volume – remains outside the control of China's government and contributes to negative public opinion toward China.<sup>42</sup>

A final dimension of influence externalities concerns the extent to which they spread beyond local settings to affect China's net influence. In some cases, externalities are contained within other countries at local, regional, or national levels. In others, they quickly spread across borders into other countries, introducing more actors into China's influence calculation. Such spillovers raise questions about relying on concepts or frameworks that only emphasize dyadic, targeted approaches to measuring influence.

Popular narratives shape the potential for spillovers. Narratives about China's global ambitions can take on qualities beyond the intentions or control of China's government. Narratives are digitally construed, circulated, and continuously edited and repackaged by government officials, academics, journalists, and others outside and inside of China. Consider again the BRI. In some cases, singular Chinese-financed development projects have served as fodder for crafting and spreading sweeping narratives about China's foreign policy motives. Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and its central role in the formulation of the 'debt-trap diplomacy' narrative offers perhaps the most notorious example.<sup>43</sup> The issue here is not whether facts belie popular narratives, but rather that such narratives can grow salient and spread to affect China's popular or even policy influence vis-à-vis multiple countries, by altering elite or public sentiment or by affecting the bargaining power of policymakers in other countries, for example. Put another way, narratives can be a multiplier for unintended influence consequences. This phenomenon, which has grown more prevalent in the current digital age, provides governments with strong incentives to work to 'control the narrative' by investing in diverse forms of image management and public diplomacy abroad.<sup>44</sup>

Studying China's unintentional influence, including influence externalities, can enrich our understanding of China's net influence. First, it broadens the range of observable influence outcomes beyond other states' policies, emphasizing the role of popular influence. Recent research shows that popular attitudes in developing countries also impact states' influence levels abroad and that states care deeply about 'winning hearts and minds' in other countries.<sup>45</sup> Second, it places greater emphasis on other actors' reactions rather than China's objectives. Influence externalities appear especially salient in the realm of foreign economic policy, where China's reform era internationalization, the 'Going Out' strategy and BRI have created significant incentives for Chinese state, quasi-state and non-state commercial actors to expand beyond China's borders. Many earlier studies highlight the distinction between state and non-state actors within these initiatives, but few have

empirically evaluated whether and how incidental influence might enhance, offset, or coexist alongside more direct influence channels.<sup>46</sup>

### **Intermediaries**

Expanding the study of Chinese influence, such as by including unintended forms of influence, demands a richer understanding of the set of Chinese actors – or ‘intermediaries’ – whose objectives, behavior, and interactions affect China’s influence equation. As emphasized above, the literature on China’s global influence tends to be state-centric. For example, Goh places a strong emphasis on the behavior of how the Chinese state translates its power into influence over other countries. Widening the scope beyond the state to include diverse actors enables researchers to more fully capture China’s net influence by conditioning on the identities and interests of different intermediaries.

As Hameiri and Jones note, the contemporary Chinese state is simultaneously fragmented, decentralized, and internationalized: ‘disaggregated state apparatuses and quasi-independent, market-facing actors are increasingly acting overseas in ways not effectively coordinated in Beijing.’<sup>47</sup> It is important then to recognize the variability of China’s presence and its implications abroad. For example, much of China’s financing and investment in developing countries is not uniformly coordinated from a central authority, but rather driven and implemented by regional and local interests, such as state-owned, private, and hybrid companies linked predominantly to subnational governments that seek business opportunities by lobbying the Chinese state in pursuit of their interests.<sup>48</sup> Such diverse actors possess distinct interests that are not always in alignment. Ching Kwan Lee demonstrates this using Chinese investment in Zambia, where Chinese SOEs operate differently from global private capital in their approach to capital accumulation.<sup>49</sup> As Lee points out, ‘Global China is taking myriad forms, ranging from foreign direct investment, labor export, and multilateral financial institutions for building cross-regional infrastructure to the globalization of Chinese civil society organizations, creation of global media networks, and global joint ventures in higher education, to name just a few examples.’<sup>50</sup> Thus, for the purpose of understanding China’s influence, we should analyze the objectives and actions of, at least, SOEs,<sup>51</sup> large and small private businesses,<sup>52</sup> and even ordinary Chinese citizens who seek opportunities abroad.<sup>53</sup> Foreign pundits and think tanks can be important intermediaries too, as shown later in this edited volume, in Anastas Vangeli and Richard Turcsányi’s vivid analysis of the ‘Chinese influence’ meme in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These actors have their own agency and interests that may not closely align nor be in direct response to the Chinese state, and as such, their actions can create influence externalities. It is crucial to understand the presence and impact of these diverse actors within host societies, which may vary according to their size, the sectors they are in, as well as the interactive dynamics they have with the local population. Therefore, we need conceptual flexibility to understand a globalized China and its variegated local impact – as well as how the behavior of different intermediaries results in different implications for China’s overall influence.<sup>54</sup>

Again, an illustrative example from the domain of foreign economic policy demonstrates the value of differentiating between intermediaries. Chinese SOEs have been some of the most high-profile overseas actors since the onset of China's 'Going Out' strategy. They can serve as the 'right arm' to the Chinese government, implementing resource deals or infrastructure construction projects as contractors that support China's political objectives. However, despite the fact that they are state-backed, SOEs are by no means state-dictated, and there is often a principal-agent problem in coordination between firms and the state.<sup>55</sup> In particular, large SOEs often have considerable autonomy from other ministerial interests, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>56</sup> In many cases, the Chinese state's strategic interests do not necessarily align with the SOEs' commercial interests,<sup>57</sup> leading to SOEs behaving in ways that contradict the Chinese government's foreign policy interests. In addition, SOEs themselves are complex and operate under fragmented and competing domestic bureaucratic politics.<sup>58</sup> There is often intense competition among different SOEs in securing domestic and international contracts from the central or provincial governments. Finally, SOEs operating in different sectors abroad, such as resource extraction and construction, typically have distinct economic, labor, social, and environmental impacts on local communities. Thus, the 'fragmented authoritarianism' framework as applied to the Chinese state can illuminate the complexities of Chinese SOEs and their global presence and impacts.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to SOEs, Chinese private capital has also gone global. Driven mostly by 'market opportunities, competition within China and the presence of a strong entrepreneurial spirit,'<sup>60</sup> these companies tend to have their own *modus operandi* distinct from the state's foreign policy goals. Of course, outgoing Chinese private capital also varies significantly in terms of scale and sectoral focus, from multinational corporations to petty businesses that sell made-in-China products at local markets in developing countries. As Lee's research demonstrates, their intense focus on profit makes private Chinese construction companies in Zambia operate differently from Chinese SOEs in the same country, such as their approaches towards labor management.<sup>61</sup> In Southeast Asia, many private Chinese investments have entered agricultural plantation sectors, such as rubber, banana, and sugar cane. Because of their relatively short investment and profit horizon, their modes of intensive plantations often lead to negative consequences for the local environment.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, some of these private business operations may be involved in illicit economies – such as illegal mining, logging, trafficking of goods, and gambling<sup>63</sup> – and as such, dealing with Chinese private capital can pose more complex challenges for host societies.

Finally, we also need to take into consideration China's influence through actions of ordinary Chinese individuals living or migrating abroad. Domestically, Chinese society has transformed itself from the image of a 'global sweatshop,' with workers at the bottom of the global capitalist value chain to now consumers with growing purchasing power. Yet, even amid improved domestic economic conditions, a combination of demographic pressure, a competitive market environment, as well as China's evolving political situation has prompted many people to emigrate. This fits within a broad pattern of the 'new wave' of Chinese migration (*xin*

*yimin*) to many parts of the world.<sup>64</sup> More and more Chinese moving abroad for study, travel, and work, particularly during the first two decades of the 21st century, have created an unprecedented level of encounters between these individuals and local host societies.<sup>65</sup> These interactions can play into larger influence processes. For example, studies of Chinese tourism abroad illustrate how the arrival of millions of Chinese tourists has led to heightened prejudice against them despite their economic contribution to local societies.<sup>66</sup> This prejudice, in addition to worsening negative popular opinion toward China, mixes with geopolitical fears of China's efforts at territorialization, particularly in the East and Southeast Asian regions.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, problems of racial discrimination that Chinese people abroad experience interact with perceived threats of Chinese migration and the Chinese state's 'influence operations' in host societies.<sup>68</sup>

### **Institutions**

Our emphasis on unintended influence – as well as the diverse set of sub-state intermediaries relevant for influence processes – connects to a crucial third element of China's international influence equation: host-country institutions. Our argument herein is straightforward: (1) China's influence depends on the target state's receptivity; (2) the target state's receptivity depends on its domestic institutions; and (3) these institutions affect whose interests matter in the target state and how those interests matter. We develop these three premises and then illustrate them in the Chinese case.

The influence-seeker's influence depends on the target state's receptivity. As discussed above, influence is relational by definition.<sup>69</sup> Influence exists only if the target changes in response to the influencer. We must therefore look at the target to understand the influencer's influence. Specifically, to analyze the potentialities and limits of China's international influence, we must look within the target state on which that influence is directed.

In turn, the target state's receptivity depends on its domestic institutions. We have just suggested that we should look within the target state – but what should we look *at* within the target state? Splitting the Waltzian billiard-ball state emits a chaotic variety of entities.<sup>70</sup> There are all kinds of individual actors that can be organized into all kinds of groups with cross-cutting cleavages – as the previous section noted.<sup>71</sup> The concept of institutions helps us manage this chaotic variety analytically and across extremely diverse countries in which the Chinese government is seeking to increase its influence.<sup>72</sup>

Douglass North defined an institution as 'a set of rules, compliance procedures, and moral and ethical behavioral norms designed to constrain the behavior of individuals in the interests of maximizing the wealth or utility of principals.'<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, North elaborated that institutions are 'the rules of the game of a society,' the 'humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction [which] are composed of formal rules (statute law, common law, regulations), informal constraints (conventions, norms of behavior, and self-imposed rules of behavior), and the enforcement characteristics of both.'<sup>74</sup>

The players in this ‘game of a society,’ many of which have already been mentioned above, are organizations: ‘groups of individuals bound by a common purpose to achieve objectives,’ which include political organizations (e.g. political parties), economic organizations (e.g. trade unions), and social organizations (e.g. religious associations).<sup>75</sup> Institutions can constrain the choices of organizations by shaping their payoff expectations, creating a structure-induced equilibrium<sup>76</sup> that may generate predictable policies and decisions. While the power of an institution is not permanent, it tends to be persistent.<sup>77</sup>

Countries are receptive or resistant to China’s attempts at international influence because their domestic institutions create particular payoff matrices and empower particular political players, in ways that encourage or discourage receptivity. Within the state, there is a multiplicity of organizations with a multiplicity of interests. Some organizations are positioned to benefit from a closer connection to China (e.g. firms which profit from exports to the Chinese market); some have opposite interests (e.g. firms affected adversely by Chinese import competition); and some are indifferent. Domestic institutions empower some relative to others, and policymakers respond to the asymmetrical distribution of domestic political influence and interests, as our subsequent examples will illustrate.

As we open up the billiard-ball state, we should analyze *how* domestic institutions structure political incentives and interactions. But such analysis is tricky because the concept of institutions is broad and encompassing. Recall North’s original definition:<sup>78</sup> do we look at the formal ‘rules,’ the ‘compliance procedures,’ or the ‘moral and ethical behavioral norms’ – and if so, which specific ones?

Different scholars have focused on different institutional elements. We focus on a core element embedded in North’s early definition – institutions can be manifested in diverse forms of constraint, but these diverse forms operate ‘in the interests of maximizing the wealth or utility of *principals* [emphasis added].’ We can interpret these ‘principals’ as the ‘constituencies’<sup>79</sup> that the policymaker depends upon to sustain its power and to whom it responds. Domestic institutions determine the size and composition of the constituencies. A democratic system with competitive elections, for instance, has a large constituency composed of the entire electorate, whereas an authoritarian system with no elections tends to have a smaller constituency composed of a narrower ‘selectorate.’<sup>80</sup> In other words, domestic institutions affect whose interests matter in the target state – whether those domestic interests are aligned with or against Chinese interests – and how policymakers respond to those domestic interests.

Our third and final premise is that domestic institutions affect whose interests matter and how those interests matter. To flesh out this premise, it is again useful to examine China’s pursuit of influence using economic means. Given its economic weight, much of China’s potential international influence derives from its international economic relations and the asymmetric interdependence in its favor. The question is how economic relations with China affect the payoff expectations of domestic constituencies to whom policymakers in the target state respond.

Two clarifications are important. First, the electorate or selectorate may split across multiple interests. It may not have a dominant preference or a majority



consensus. But actions by China's government or other Chinese intermediaries, as well as exogenous developments, can shift the balance of preferences. Positive actions by Chinese actors that accommodate the interests within the target state can thus increase Chinese influence.<sup>81</sup> Negative actions – such as those produced through intermediaries and influence externalities – can provide fodder for political entrepreneurs and the media<sup>82</sup> to create focal points in elite discourse or public opinion against China.<sup>83</sup> Thus, focusing on institutions does not mean focusing solely on 'structures,' but on how agency operates within structures.

Second, constituencies are not necessarily driven by pure material interests such as pocketbook considerations. As Kathleen Thelen observed, institutional analyses that assume rational choice have become more anthropologically sophisticated in how interests and interactions are set up.<sup>84</sup> Recent studies on trade preferences suggest individual interests can be sociotropic: people do not only care about their own well-being, but also that of their society and national in-group at large.<sup>85</sup>

The sociotropic imperative may be especially strong if asymmetric economic dependence raises concerns about security and the erosion of national sovereignty, which may trigger nationalistic sentiments. Economic relations can translate into political dependence.<sup>86</sup> The sheer volume of China's trade has led many countries to become more dependent on China and therefore more worried about the potential leverage Beijing holds over them.<sup>87</sup> The evidence is mixed, but the concerns and perceptions are real.<sup>88</sup> Consider Australia. Deep commercial ties between the Australian and Chinese economies had generated substantial wealth. Business sector interests prioritized economic relations with China; most Australians seemed comfortable with China as an economic partner; and politicians responded accordingly with a policy of accommodation.<sup>89</sup> But as the Chinese footprint became more apparent to the average citizen – such as the common perception that Chinese buyers were pushing property prices out of reach<sup>90</sup> – the sand was already shifting beneath the status quo. Later in this edited volume, Andrew Chubb shows how threat perceptions cascaded across bureaucrats and media, drowning out the business interests to create a new focal point in Australian politics.<sup>91</sup> As media outlets shone a bright light on a large variety of controversial Chinese actions, from illicit political donations to collaborations with Communist propaganda organs, the Australian government hardened its position toward China.<sup>92</sup> China's sanctions in 2020 to punish Australia through heavy tariffs on a wide range of Australian produce from beef and lamb to wine and lobsters<sup>93</sup> further infuriated the public, which in turn put greater pressure on the Australian government to further resist China.<sup>94</sup>

Also in this edited volume, Andrew Yeo and Enrico Gloria show how Chinese assertive behavior in the South China Sea fueled strong nationalist sentiments against China in the Philippines.<sup>95</sup> The Duterte government, which tried to resist the public pressure, found itself an easy target for domestic opposition parties. Chinese investments and capital in the Philippines also did not seem to improve domestic opinion. They increased significantly under the Duterte administration, but are still relatively limited. The business constituency thus has limited interests in sticking its neck out for China.

Our argument is not restricted to democratic systems only. In Iran, a former ambassador to China identified three constituencies that influenced Iran's policy toward China: (1) business communities 'who only care about their profits'; (2) elites who saw China as a means to make Iran a great power; and (3) elites who saw China as a threat to Iran's own influence and security.<sup>96</sup> Insofar as these constituencies balance each other, one would expect Iranian policy to equivocate, unless actions by China or a third party (especially the U.S. or EU) create a new focal point in the political discourse that repels policymakers toward or from the orbit of Chinese influence.

These illustrative cases are simply to make the point that one can better understand the efficacy of Chinese influence – intentional or not – by analyzing *which* constituencies in a target state matter and how, given a particular institutional setting. Variations across domestic institutions can help explain differences in receptivity or resistance toward Chinese influence. Macro-level policies toward China's rise, from hedging and soft balancing<sup>97</sup> to multilateralism and institutional order building,<sup>98</sup> are not exclusively induced by the security environment alone. They can be fruitfully analyzed from the 'ground up,' from analyzing how the domestic institutional setting shapes the constituencies upon which the makers of those macro-level policies depend.

In short, host country institutions matter for both state-driven influence-seeking studied in earlier literature and for the unintentional influence we emphasize above created by a multitude of actors. Domestic institutions shape whether and how the behavior of different actors from the influence-wielder state, as well as reactions within the host environment, are included in the aggregation of societal preferences within the host country.

## Roadmap for This Book

This introduction has outlined three concepts – intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions – that can help make sense of a rapidly proliferating set of Chinese influence-related activities. Recent studies point to cross-cutting functional issues – like health, data, technology – as multipliers fostering *other* sites of influence generation. For example, analysis points to China's use of 'vaccine diplomacy' and collaboration in global health efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>99</sup> to boost China's influence in other non-health related issue areas like technology exports and supply-chain management.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, research highlights how participating in multilateral data governance arenas projects China's ability to set discrete technical standards globally into smart city and green farming initiatives.<sup>101</sup> Other approaches lead us to consider the cross-cutting effect of social media technologies reverberating master narrative memes of China's influence.<sup>102</sup> Taking intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions seriously can help ground careful conceptual and empirical research across these and other domains.

The remainder of this edited volume provides fresh theoretical and empirical insights on different dimensions of China's net influence, as well as applications to

some of the themes discussed in this introductory chapter. Contributors of this volume bring the above theoretical framework to bear, fleshing out and disentangling the complex forces underpinning how Chinese influence radiates beyond its borders within the conceptual loci of intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions. We endeavor here to offer a quick snapshot of the chapters, which draw on examples from myriad contexts and are buttressed by rich empirics, methodological pluralism, and geographical diversity. Indeed, the very complexity of these examples accentuates why traditional accounts and conceptualizations of 'influence' may not adequately capture the multidimensionality of *Chinese* influence, demonstrating the versatility of the three-prong framework.

In the Intermediaries section, Chapter 1 authored by Lina Benabdallah analyzes influence processes in China–Africa relations through a relational lens. The chapter, titled 'The Power of Influence and the Influence of Power in China–Africa,' argues that one-way, linear approaches focused only on influence seeker motives and behaviors do not explain realities on the ground. Instead, influence is a two-way process in which the seeker and target both possess agency. Benabdallah unpacks this line of thinking across media and cultural Chinese public diplomacy as well as party-to-party diplomacy. Her findings highlight the important role of intermediaries and their interpersonal relationships. In particular, according to Benabdallah, a diverse set of African actors has significant agency within the process of Chinese influence-seeking. They can diffuse norms, place pressure on the Chinese government to adjust its position, and even wield influence over their influence-seeking Chinese counterparts. They can also promote their own cultures, languages, and ideas to Chinese counterparts aiming to do the same. Many of China's potential conduits of influence within its diplomacy toolkit also generate opportunities for Chinese actors to be influenced by receiving counterparts.

In Chapter 2, authored by Andrew Chubb, 'Disaggregating "Chinese Influence": Concepts, Practices, and Effects of PRC Overseas Political Activities,' investigates how the PRC advances political interests and pursues influence in liberal democracies. Chubb accounts for the broader context of the PRC's multifarious lines of overseas political work, adding nuance to the contemporary debate by gauging the intentions behind PRC political influence activities in examining the key concepts that support and motivate them, before examining each specific practice in terms of the actors involved and their degree of success. Chubb finds that target countries' responses determine whether such activities generate influence. Liberal democracies' institutions have been highly resistant to PRC influence on national security and foreign policy, but permissive of PRC agents eroding human rights of their Chinese diaspora and exile communities.

In the Intermediaries section, in Chapter 3, authored by Ronan Tse-min Fu, 'Hirschmanesque Effects: Typology, Scope Conditions, and a Case Study of the Koizumi Administration's China Policy' analyzes how international economic dependence on China fosters domestic vested interests that are pro-China. This 'Hirschmanesque' phenomenon expresses itself through soft lobbying, hard lobbying, and policy reversal, each of which involves different scope conditions and reflects a different depth of economic benefits derived from China. A case study

of China–Japan relations under the Koizumi administration, focusing on the controversial issue of Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, highlights the role and limits of domestic intermediaries – particularly business interest groups – as conduits of influence.

In contrast, Chapter 4 authored by Selina Ho explores China’s power and influence as a hydro-hegemon, focusing on three specific types of Chinese power in the river basin: institutional, coercive, and structural. These powers exert influence through three mechanisms: inducement, or institutional/bargaining power; use or threat of force, representing coercive power; and persuasion, demonstrating structural power and institutional/agenda-setting power. The chapter outlines three variables to measure influence: (1) whether the target state’s behavior aligns with Chinese preferences; (2) whether the target state accepts the norms or rules of institutions created by China; and (3) whether the target state acknowledges its disadvantages in relation to China and considers Chinese preferences and interests when making decisions. In particular, Ho’s chapter resonates with the intentionality theme of the book. It demonstrates that Chinese power and influence can be intentional/non-intentional and direct/indirect.

In Chapter 5, ‘Intentionality and Intermediaries: The Evolving Dynamics of the Belt and Road Initiative within China’ by Min Ye considers questions about influence in the context of the BRI. The BRI is among China’s most (in)famous foreign policy initiatives associated with growing Chinese influence in recent years. Over a decade into the BRI, Ye suggests that a large chorus of international claims about the BRI and its influence consequences for China are overly static in that they depend on particular conditions in singular countries at a given point in time. She instead proposes a dynamic approach focused on a complex set of intermediaries and their interests and behaviors that comprise the BRI. The BRI is often seen as a top-down initiative, but within it are a constantly evolving set of political and commercial actors who collect feedback and learn from changing domestic and international circumstances. This approach helps clarify ‘whose intentions matter and how they shape outcomes’ with regard to Chinese influence in specific situations. For example, China’s ability to act uniformly and influence debt restructuring negotiations is limited by loan agreements signed by local governments and companies. The chapter’s approach raises questions about the accuracy of popular accounts of the BRI as a monolithic influence generation vehicle.

In the Institutions section, Chapter 6 authored by Enrico Gloria and Andrew Yeo, delves into Filipino perceptions of China during the presidencies of Duterte (2016–2022) and early Marcos (2022–present). Through the lens on domestic institutions in the Philippines, they argue that even as China’s power and influence grow in Southeast Asia, their impact in the Philippines remains uneven. The authors critically examine the limitations of Chinese public diplomacy in the Philippines, with a focus on the Duterte era, during which there was a noticeable increase in Chinese influence through various channels such as investments, SOEs, and cultural and educational agencies funded by China. However, several unintended outcomes, referred to as ‘influence externalities,’ including Chinese encroachments in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) and the proliferation of China-based

offshore gaming businesses, have sparked a strong nationalist backlash among Filipinos, solidifying perceptions of China as unreliable and threatening. They suggest that the country's nationalist stance significantly affects its receptivity to China's expanding public diplomacy.

Chapter 7 on “Chinese Influence” in Central and Eastern Europe? Diffusion of a Meme authored by Anastas Vangeli and Richard Turcsányi analyzes the nature and manifestations of the ‘Chinese influence’ meme, a ‘viral’ idea that has spread far and wide. Comparing the claims in the meme against the realities on the ground, Vangeli and Turcsanyi show that the alarmist discourse on ‘Chinese influence’ in CEE exaggerates the leverage that China has in the region and proclaims successes of Chinese influence not supported by evidence. While there are legitimate concerns about China's actions and their international impacts, important realities and complexities in the relations between China and different countries in CEE are flattened in the meme, as the meme cherry-picked anecdotes, ‘othered’ both China and CEE, and assumed both as monolithic entities. The reality is far more complex and dynamic. Political entrepreneurs in CEE countries navigating their interests within institutional constraints and opportunities – agency operating within structure – underlie the domestic dynamics of China-CEE relations.

In Chapter 8 authored by Tim Nicholas Rühlig, ‘Technical Standardization—A Power Source for Rising China?’, investigates whether and how technical standardization reflects emerging power competition over high technology in various multilateral and multistakeholder settings. Although technical standardization processes follow an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary logic, both Chinese and non-Chinese actors see technical standardization as a field of power competition. Rühlig engages with the popular debate and outlines different dimensions and mechanisms through which standard-setting turns into wider international influence. Drawing from statistical data, primary sources, and in-depth interviews, his chapter suggests seven proxies to measure China's growing impact on standard-setting and analyzes potential risks stemming from this development.

Finally, in the conclusion, Steve Chan argues that China's influence in global politics is highly context-dependent and cannot be measured in absolute terms. He cautions against simplistic assessments, emphasizing that influence is relational and varies based on the issue at hand, the target country, and the geopolitical balance of power. While China has significant economic leverage, its normative appeal and soft power remain weaker than that of the U.S. Chan critiques existing studies for being one-sided, often portraying China as uniquely engaged in influence attempts while ignoring counter-efforts by other nations. He stresses that influence attempts do not always lead to successful outcomes and that analysts frequently infer motivations without concrete evidence. Furthermore, he highlights the importance of structural, institutional, and ideational power, noting that China's influence must be understood within a broader global context rather than in isolation. Ultimately, he warns against alarmist narratives that exaggerate China's influence and calls for a more nuanced, comparative, and dynamic approach to analyzing international power relations.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on Courtney J. Fung, Enze Han, Kai Quek, and Austin Strange, 'Conditioning China's Influence: Intentionality, Intermediaries, and Institutions', *Journal of Contemporary China* 32(139), (2023), pp. 1–16.
- 2 For discussion, see Thorsten Benner et al., *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Influence in Europe* (Berlin: CPPI & Merics, 2018); Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *China's Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 2019).
- 3 See the case studies in Evelyn Goh, ed., *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016); David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2013); Richard Q. Turcsanyi, 'Assessing the Power of China: Insights from the Conceptual Thinking about Power', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 22(3), (2017), pp. 473–86.
- 4 Robert A. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 40.
- 5 Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 6th edn (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2002), p. 17.
- 6 Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 6th edn (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2002), pp. 38–43.
- 7 Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security* 27(4), (2003), pp. 5–56; Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security* 36(1), (2011), pp. 41–72; Shaun Breslin, 'China and the Global Order: Signalling Threat or Friendship?', *International Affairs* 89(3), (2013), pp. 615–34.
- 8 David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, 'Racing toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma', *International Security* 39(2), (2014), pp. 52–91.
- 9 Courtney J. Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2019); Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 10 Nadège Rolland, 'China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Underwhelming or Game-Changer?', *The Washington Quarterly* 40(1), (2017), pp. 127–42; Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Courtney J. Fung, *China and Global Security Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Cambridge Elements in Global China Series, 2025).
- 11 Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009); Axel Dreher et al., *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China's Overseas Development Program* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- 12 A similar point is made by Enze Han, 'Non-State Chinese Actors and Their Impact on Relations between China and Mainland Southeast Asia', *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia* 1, (2021), pp. 1–19. For examples, see Evelyn Goh, *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 13 The following summarizes Evelyn Goh, 'Introduction', in Evelyn Goh, *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 6.
- 14 Goh citing Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 6th edn (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2002), p. 17.

## 20 Conditioning China's Influence

- 15 Evelyn Goh, 'Introduction', in Evelyn Goh, *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 12.
- 16 Compelling the target to do something it would otherwise prefer not to, through credibly signaling the costs of non-compliance.
- 17 Using rewards when the target behaves in ways that the influence-wielder prefers.
- 18 When the influence-wielder can convince the target to do what the influence-wielder prefers.
- 19 Evelyn Goh, 'Conclusion', in Evelyn Goh, *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 282. Also see Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), conclusion.
- 20 See Scott Kastner, 'Analysing Chinese Influence: Challenges and Opportunities', in *Rising China's Influence in Global Asia*, ed. Evelyn Goh (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016); M. Taylor Fravel, Melanie Manion, and Yuhua Wang, 'A "China in the World" Paradigm for Scholarship', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56(1), (2021), pp. 1–17.
- 21 An important innovation has been to account for principal-agent dynamics between the state and quasi-state actors that affect the state's ability to seek influence through delegation. See William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 22 Daniel W. Drezner, Henry Farrell, and Abraham L. Newman, eds., *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).
- 23 Austin Strange, *Chinese Global Infrastructure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Elements in Global China, 2023).
- 24 For a discussion to this end, see Andrew Chubb, "Did China Actually Try to Install a Spy in Australia's Parliament? The Many Murky Details Make It Hard to Know," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2019, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/24/did-china-actually-try-install-spy-australias-parliament-murder-many-murky-details-make-it-hard-know/>.
- 25 Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Alexander Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader, 'The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach', *International Studies Quarterly* 64(3), (2020), pp. 723–33; Jie Chen, *The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement: Assessing China's Only Open Political Opposition* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).
- 26 See Enze Han, 'Non-State Chinese Actors and Their Impact on Relations between China and Mainland Southeast Asia', *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia* 1, (2021); Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, 'Rising Powers and State Transformation: The Case of China', *European Journal of International Relations* 22(1), (2016), pp. 72–98; Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 27 For instance, see Aleksandra W. Gadzala, ed., *Africa and China: How Africans and Their Governments Are Shaping Relations with China* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017); and Andrew Chubb, 'The Securitization of "Chinese Influence" in Australia', *Journal of Contemporary China* 32(139), (2023), pp. 17–34.
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## **Part II**

# **Intentionality**



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# 1 The Power of Influence and the Influence of Power in China–Africa Relations

*Lina Benabdallah*

## Introduction

Influence in International Politics, and especially in the context of China's foreign policy making, has of late come to be associated with revisionism whereby Beijing's resolve to grow its influence (especially but not limited to the Global South) is understood as a strategy to undermine the Liberal International Order. From this vantage point, China's growing influence is taken to be a threat to the stability of the US-led liberal order. Even more, in policy circles and official foreign policy discourses of several European and Anglo-American officials, Chinese influence is malign, subversive, and co-opting. It is to be "curbed," "countered," and "contained."<sup>1</sup> In this way, some analysts use the term "sharp power" to describe China projecting "influence internationally, with the objectives of limiting free expression, spreading confusion, and distorting the political environment within democracies."<sup>2</sup> In the context of China–Africa relations, views on China's influence vary widely according to who is evaluating said influence. When looking at African citizens broadly and owing to a long history of anti-colonial solidarity, China's influence in the continent is not by default seen as a threat, something that Afrobarometer surveys demonstrate time and again.<sup>3</sup> However, to policymakers and officials from outside of the continent (especially from Europe and the US), the perspective is alarmist as they repeatedly hint at (and sometimes directly point the finger at) China's influence being a threat to African as well as Western interests.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the heightened tensions between the US and China and how these are playing out across the Global South create situations where leaders from African countries, for instance, express their discontent with the pressure put on them not just by influence from Beijing but also from Washington.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that the more Western officials draw alarmist attention to China's influence, they are also inadvertently bringing to the fore their own tactics of influence and exercising pressure on Global South actors.

In recent years, questions probing China's motivations in its foreign policy conduct towards African states, the mechanisms for striking successful bids in the continent, and the strategic advantages that Chinese actors have in Africa have proliferated. With the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expanding to include areas spanning infrastructure construction, critical mineral extraction, security cooperation, maritime security, and digital governance, China's influence



in Africa has gained more attention, especially in light of the heightened geopolitical tensions between the US and China. Yet, what sometimes gets sidelined in examinations of China's influence in Africa is a focus on understanding the intentions, actors, and institutions that enable China's influence or challenge it. This is especially so when it comes to local actors in target countries and their perceptions of China's influence.

Thus, to understand China's influence in Africa, this chapter adopts the framework developed in the introduction of this volume in which the authors argue that regardless of whether influence is intentional or unintended, it depends on target state receptivity, which in turn depends on target state domestic institutions since these institutions affect whose interests matter in the end. There are a number of areas of influence one could examine with regard to China's foreign policy towards Africa such as economic diplomacy and financial leverage,<sup>6</sup> digital infrastructure, and information and communication technology (ICT),<sup>7</sup> among others. However, I focus my analysis on areas of influence which are characterized by a relational approach centering on social capital and professional networks. The reason behind focusing on a relational approach to influence is that as scholars of relationality and *guanxi* have argued, building social capital and putting a premium on expanding networks are vital to understanding both power and influence in Chinese foreign policy making.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter is organized into three sections as follows. The first section explores the various conceptual frameworks for examining influence in International Relations and Foreign Policy. While the chapter deploys the conceptual framework provided in the introduction of the volume, it also draws on two other studies: Evelyn Goh's (2016) study of the modes of influence as well as Fung et al.'s (2023) complementing analysis. In reviewing these studies, the chapter highlights the importance of a relational approach to influence by centering the role of social capital in projecting, expanding, and maintaining influence. Second, the chapter illustrates the relational aspect of influence in China–Africa relations by looking at forum diplomacy, media diplomacy, Confucius Institutes (CIs) and cultural diplomacy, and party-to-party diplomacy. Overall, an important underlying argument in this chapter is that a significant driver of the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s motivation to increase its influence in Africa comes as a reaction to Western media's negative rhetoric about China–Africa relations. Inadvertently, in some way, a negative externality of Western media and politicized rhetoric insisting that China's engagements in Africa are entirely nefarious is an evolving presence of Chinese media and cultural diplomacy in Africa to counter these narratives. The concluding section sums up the study and discusses avenues for potential future research.

### **International Relations Influence Frameworks and China–Africa Relations**

Although influence and power are intimately related in the analysis of international relations and foreign policy, they are nonetheless different concepts. For

approaches which favor an understanding of power as an accumulation of largely “material resources,” influence is understood to be the activation of these resources to achieve policy goals. The difference between the two is especially evident when we consider examples when wealth accumulation does not necessarily translate to successfully affecting behaviors.<sup>9</sup> Influence here is taken to mean “the act of modifying or otherwise having an impact upon another actor’s preferences or behavior in favor of one’s own aims.”<sup>10</sup> As such, another difference between power and influence is that influence-seeking policies and behaviors sometimes yield the opposite results from what’s intended. As explained by Fung et al. (2023), “influence does not increase by default and can just as easily decrease, meaning certain behaviors can result in net negative levels of influence”<sup>11</sup> regardless of how significant economic or political leverage a state might have. For Fung et al. (this volume), forms of influence vary according to intentionality, intermediary actors, and institutions. Intentionality, for them, is an area that merits more scholarly attention as influence can be wielded (either positively or negatively) not based only on intentional actions but also as unintended. I agree that distinguishing between intended and unintended forms of influence is important because the outcome of such influence will be felt and interpreted by target actors with or without complete information about the situation and these perceptions matter.

Whereas the concept of power is usually used to refer to a state’s resources (economic, military, or even cultural), influence is typically viewed as the translation and conversion of those resources into actual outcomes. From this perspective, an actor is therefore first powerful and then influential, a claim which I dispute as this assumes that there is a linear order of the two concepts where power comes first and after some considerable power accumulation, then powerful actors move on to activating and converting their resources and power into influence. However, I do not believe that power necessarily comes before influence or that influence is the translation of power capabilities. Instead, power and influence can be mutually reinforcing of one another and that there is a synergy between the two especially when taking into account China–Africa *guanxi*-building activities. Power and influence should not be treated as separate but as processes that exist in a feedback loop reinforcing and feeding one another. Separating between power and influence is more conducive to analytical frameworks of international relations that take power to be a (material) possession and influence as the outcome of that possession. However, both power and influence, in my view, are relational processes that produce and are in turn multiplied through the influence an actor gains from its network of relations and connections.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, when examining Chinese influence in Africa from a relational perspective, it becomes possible to acknowledge the agency of advocacy groups, academics, scholarship awardees, and other intermediaries.<sup>13</sup> When students receive scholarships to travel to China to study, it would be only half the picture to imagine that they are merely the subjects of influence and not agents of it.

Relatedly, much of the scholarship on China’s influence and power has been mostly focused on China’s Southeast Asian neighbors and to some degree Australia and New Zealand, as well as recently looking at Europe and the US.<sup>14</sup> Analyzing China’s influence in contexts where perhaps China does not need to wield coercive

or even persuasive power in order to shape the interests of target actors is challenging because it requires delineating between when interests align and the possible impact of influence in maintaining interest alignment or in shaping future interests to align with Beijing's.<sup>15</sup> As such, this chapter stands to make a contribution by outlining the modalities and forms of influence in the context of China–Africa relations as a case where isolating the impact of influence is more difficult based on interests being more or less similar.<sup>16</sup>

### **Forms of Influence in Chinese Foreign Policy in Africa**

Scholars who have examined influence in the context of China's relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors observe that the forms and modes of influence China deploys in those contexts differ drastically from those it deploys in its relations with the US or more developed countries. By and large, in much of Southeast Asia, Beijing's preferences and the preferences of its targets are either aligned or share enough in common for persuasion to be a successful tool of influence. Yet, as illustrated in China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea, China has also exerted coercive tools of influence, making it difficult to generalize about China's influence in the Global South from one particular example.

In the context of China's influence in Africa, for example, like the case of China's Southeast Asian neighbors, preferences naturally converge. This is already relational because preferences converge and grow (multiply) from both sides, not just China as a cause of host countries shifting their priorities to match China's interests. As Fung et al. contend (page 14 in this volume), because of the variegated impact of actors on China's side (state-owned companies, private sector, elites, diplomats, tourists, migrants, and so on) on local actors, we need more case examinations to illuminate as many forms of influence as possible. There are other hybrid forms of influence in China–Africa relations, for instance, when we see Chinese ambassadors and diplomats in Africa write op-eds in host countries' newspapers, post social media videos showing them enjoying local cultural and culinary experiences, or engaging the youth in host countries in fun activities. These are attempts to communicate directly with African populations that help at least maintain, if not increase, the perception that China–Africa relations share more in culture and history than Europe–Africa relations.

While looking at intermediaries complements traditional approaches by including “state-to-state interaction, examining party-level, sub-state, and even non-state connectivity,”<sup>17</sup> Fung et al. (in this volume) put forward a framework that examines institutions and intentions as three important aspects about influence which I find to be useful for a relational approach. Focusing on intentionality helps account for not only the impact of unintended consequences and externalities but also acts of resistance and challenge by host state officials. The second aspect is about accounting for intermediaries allowing analyses to go beyond asymmetric dyads (government to government). As will be demonstrated in the analysis below, especially in the section on party-to-party relations and media and cultural diplomacy, the involvement of intermediaries will become evidence as a very important part of

understanding influence in China–Africa relations. The third aspect is institutions where the authors argue for the need to take into account the domestic institutions in host countries to better understand influence not as a linear process which translates power accumulation into influence but as a complex process which involves many agents. Here, the authors make a three-fold argument about institutions and influence stating that “(1) China’s influence depends on the target state’s receptivity; (2) the target state’s receptivity depends on its domestic institutions; and (3) these institutions affect whose interests matter in the target state and how those interests matter.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, even though Fung et al. (this volume) do not engage relationality in a direct way, their framework for conceptualizing influence is quite conducive to a relational approach to influence in China–Africa relations. Again, my argument in this chapter is that it is not productive to take influence as a linear process that results from the accumulation of power and take China to be the powerful actor which exercises influence over a passive recipient African state. Instead, I propose to think of influence relationally, as a process that engages actors on both sides and acknowledges the role that intermediaries and domestic institutions play. As such, in the next few sections, I will expand on China’s media, public, and cultural diplomacy activities in Africa. It will be evident from the examples and cases examined that intermediaries and institutions do play an important role, albeit in a multilayered way rather than a compartmentalized way that delineates between when institutions play a role or when intermediaries become more prioritized.

### **Modes of Influence in Chinese Foreign Policy in Africa: A Relational Approach**

Influence can be found in every tool of the diplomatic toolbox. A relational approach to influence is first and foremost a recognition that diplomacy necessarily happens in social environments which co-constitute actors and shape their decisions, views, and ideas. It is hardly the case that presumed-to-be great powers are immune from being influenced. Instead, and to the contrary, oftentimes, the very modalities that they create to influence “others” are the ones that cause them to be influenced. A relational framework of influence would, therefore, enable us to see that the story is not only about what the influence-seeker wants but looks at all parties involved and acknowledges the agency of perceived-as-smaller actors. In this section, I focus my analysis on four major conduits of relational influence in the context of China–Africa ties.

#### ***Influence Through Forum Diplomacy***

Forum diplomacy has become a significant pillar of China’s diplomacy in Africa (and beyond).<sup>19</sup> In the year 2000, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was officially launched after a series of consultation meetings and diplomatic influence going in both directions.<sup>20</sup> FOCAC is designed to take place every three years alternating between being hosted by China and by an African country.

It is a mechanism that since its start focuses on reforming the international order and righting the injustices that are inflicted upon developing countries. From the start, from China's side FOCAC was a platform where China, the largest developing country, can find organic affinities with fellow developing countries from the African continent to alter the aspects of the order which are skewed against them.<sup>21</sup> As such, FOCAC developed in a way that multiplies preferences since from the beginning it was built on an overlap of interests. As a South-South dialogue and cooperation platform, FOCAC was established first as a political institution that was aimed at being a reaction to the increasing disparities between the Global North and South, rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped, and as a reaction to the failures of the system with its International Monetary Fund lending practices that are unpopular among Africans.<sup>22</sup> During the first meeting of FOCAC, Chinese and African government officials agreed that the Forum was a platform of reform of the existing order and was meant to produce "a just and equitable new international political and economic order."<sup>23</sup> Such a new order is deemed "indispensable for the democratization of international relations and for the effective participation of developing countries in the international process of decision-making."<sup>24</sup>

Since the year 2000, FOCAC has expanded to areas including economic cooperation, security, media, cultural exchanges, and so on. To date, FOCAC has been held nine times, with the latest one taking place in Beijing, China, in 2024. The Forum has been hosted both at the summit level (heads of state) and at the ministerial level. Four iterations were held at the summit level: 2006, 2015, 2018, and 2024, where heads of state instead of ministers were invited to the meeting. FOCAC Dakar in 2021 was a ministerial-level meeting; President Xi Jinping made his remarks through a virtual platform without making the trip to Senegal. During the COVID-19 pandemic, FOCAC hosted an emergency meeting to discuss mutual aid and cooperation among African and Chinese stakeholders. This emergency meeting is not counted as a regular FOCAC session. At the end of every regular FOCAC meeting, an action plan is released outlining the areas of cooperation, financial pledges, and projects agreed upon that will take place over the next three years. Yet, FOCAC is not only about the financial pledges. Instead, summit diplomacy is a mechanism of influence diffusion through the performances of holding banquets, dinners, tours, private audiences, handshakes among leaders, and so on.

Indeed, forum diplomacy is a convenient platform for boosting relations through institutions and intermediaries by increasing meetings among high-level elites from China and their African counterparts. It is also a platform which, despite being critiqued as asymmetrical – putting one country with an entire continent as two actors – is best analyzed from a relational perspective. This means that looking at FOCAC as a one-way direction of influence by Beijing over its African counterparts would miss the mark. Instead, one needs to focus on both the intended and unintended consequences of influence in order to better grasp how it works. In this way, it is more fruitful to understand the various mechanisms of exercising influence under FOCAC and then point out how they are utilized intentionally and otherwise by Chinese and African actors, respectively. I start with the aesthetic aspect of forum diplomacy.

Aesthetically speaking, when FOCAC is held in China, Chinese Presidents are depicted as warmly welcoming African counterparts, treating them to red carpet receptions, and taking the time to have private audiences with several of them, each of these processes being a potential mechanism of influence.<sup>25</sup> Influence here can be viewed as influence on Chinese domestic audiences, showing them the commitment of their country to South-South solidarity. It can also be viewed as influence geared towards international audiences, with global media platforms picking up on images of embrace, handshakes, and so on between Chinese and African leaders. Similarly, for African state leaders, being involved in high-level international meetings can also be used to send legitimacy signals to domestic audiences, especially around election times. Through FOCAC, government heads of state or heads of government from the African continent meet and mingle regularly, spend time talking about issues that matter to them, and are getting used to seeing in China a serious partner that takes them seriously.<sup>26</sup> Among the advantages of this forum diplomacy in expanding influence is precisely this direct contact and the art of social relations, which are both tied to trust-building and enhancing mutual respect.

Chinese foreign policy makers utilize FOCAC to implicitly boast about China's development success and the serious socio-economic advances it was able to achieve in the last few decades. The Forum can become a place where China's development success is framed as a potential inspiration and possibly also a rough model of development which is accessible to other developing countries. There is an opening for China to "build a new type of international relations" and lead a different way to development – this so-called win-win model – and FOCAC is the perfect exemplar and vehicle to develop and host this new type of relations. To be sure, Chinese officials including President Xi Jinping have gestured that China stands ready to share its "wisdom" to help inform African economies as they seek growth and development. Since forum diplomacy is an established mechanism to share China's wisdom with Africans, Beijing launched multiple sub-forums under the umbrella of FOCAC for more focused exchanges.

One such sub-forum is the China Africa Defense and Security Forum which was launched in July 2018. In keeping with viewing forum diplomacy as a viable mechanism to share Chinese wisdom with Africans, Beijing hosted defense ministers and high-ranking military officials from fifty African states.<sup>27</sup> The Forum lasted two weeks during which African delegations attended seminars, visited Chinese facilities, were introduced to Chinese-made military equipment, and toured several cities in China. But perhaps most importantly, in the two weeks, Chinese military officials had a unique networking opportunity with their African counterparts during which exchanges about common visions for peace and stability, challenges, and aspirations for the future took place. Only focusing on the military base in Djibouti can eclipse this important aspect of China's diplomacy.

In 2019, Beijing hosted another iteration of the security Forum dubbed the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum and invited African defense ministers and high-ranking officials to China for a week. Similar to the previous forum, this was an opportunity to showcase China's military equipment and tech know-how and exchange views and visions for regional and global peace and security.

For example, during the forum, African military officials were invited to visit the Special Police College in Beijing that trains anti-terrorism personnel for China's elite armed police force. During the visit, involved parties (African and Chinese) discussed military cooperation and combat-oriented training opportunities for African delegations at the Special Police College.<sup>28</sup>

Security cooperation and military diplomacy are not the only areas where a sub-FOCAC forum was organized. As mentioned above, there is an upward trend in the proliferation of sub-forums, held under the umbrella of FOCAC focusing on media, agriculture, think tank collaborations, pandemic prevention, among other topics. These sub-forums are an opportunity to bring African civil servants and government officials of various ranks (from high-ranking to middle or low-level officials) to China for several-day visits. The visits can serve multiple purposes including showing African officials around, taking them to various Chinese facilities, enterprises, as well as field trips to big cities around the country.<sup>29</sup> The forum is also a viable mechanism for Africans to strengthen their ties both to Chinese counterparts and to other Africans present at these meetings.

Due in large part to the social dynamics and networking opportunities provided by hosting such high-profile gatherings, the forum has so far been extremely successful.<sup>30</sup> Forum diplomacy in the context of China–Africa relations is able to yield spectacular results in terms of elite visits and mutual exchanges. For example, “from 2009 to 2018, African leaders from 53 countries visited China 222 times.”<sup>31</sup> In addition, during the seventh edition (September 2018), fifty-one heads of state arrived in Beijing for the summit, which was a record high for the number of African heads of state who attended the same event.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, China is not the only country which currently deploys regular forum diplomacy with African states. Before FOCAC, Japan created the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) platform for engaging African states in 1993. TICAD has also held seven meetings so far, similar to FOCAC, although only one of them was hosted on the continent (Kenya in 2016).<sup>33</sup> Since the launch of FOCAC, however, there has been a proliferation of forum diplomacy platforms with Africa initiated by countries including India, Turkey, the US, and Russia, as well as regions including the Eurozone and Arab states.<sup>34</sup> Without necessarily suggesting that FOCAC is directly responsible for the growth in forum diplomacy with Africa, it is clear that the success of FOCAC has inspired several states to join in this modality of diplomacy with African states. Influence through FOCAC is intimately tied to China's larger public diplomacy portfolio for African countries, as media is another outlet for developing influence. Certainly, the most recent US–Africa Summit (held in November 2022) demonstrated Beijing's ability to socialize the US into understanding the importance of forum diplomacy not only with Africans but actors from the Global South more broadly.

### *Influence Through Media Diplomacy*

In a speech directed at China's major news outlets including the People's Daily, Xinhua, and CGTN, President Xi Jinping urged reporters to “tell China's story

well” and to create “flagship media with strong international influence.”<sup>35</sup> From the early years of FOCAC, Chinese policymakers have considered Western media outlets’ reporting on China–Africa matters to be negatively biased towards China.<sup>36</sup> To Beijing, news media outlets such as France 24, CNN, BBC, as well as major global written press deliberately undermine China’s reputation in Africa and to an extent pose a threat to Chinese foreign policy core interests. Such contestations made investing in influence via public diplomacy and media cooperation with African countries a top priority for Chinese officials. From the CPC’s perspective, the image of China abroad is necessarily influenced by the kind of reporting and narratives of China which are diffused in African media outlets and social media spheres. To this end, the Chinese government dedicated a large financial package to restructure its influence through enhancing its global image including in African media and African publics.

Chinese President Xi’s call to “tell China’s story well” suggests that for the CPC, (re)claiming China’s discursive power via global news media is important for writing the narrative about China’s rise.<sup>37</sup> Some of the concrete ways to boost China’s influence in international news outlets can be classified in one of these two big categories: state-owned media actors and ventures which are a mix between public and private media and telecommunication companies. Establishing headquarters for Chinese media outlets (Xinhua and CGTN) in Kenya in order to have a visible presence and to facilitate coverage and content on the continent is part of the former. An example of the latter is creating content via radio channels (especially through Chinese Radio International) and disseminating the news content through cell phone services via a partnership with Huawei and ZTE. Other examples include Chinese ambassadors based in African countries penning opinion pieces in major African newspapers and Chinese media producing content geared for African diaspora audiences and Africa-related content in China’s African outlets. During the last few years, social media platforms, mainly Twitter and Facebook, have seen a proliferation of Chinese diplomat accounts and official pages opened to diffuse information about bilateral relations and activities sponsored by Chinese embassies.<sup>38</sup>

Media cooperation is one of the pillars of the FOCAC action plan, a document released after each forum to chart out the main areas of cooperation between China and African governments.<sup>39</sup> During FOCAC 2018, a group of eighteen delegations including several African government leaders visited the headquarters of StarTimes whose founder Pang Xinxing had told Xinhua in 2012 that he had “long dreamed of building a global media empire,” with the capacity to “counter the negative portrayal of China that he believes exists in Western media.”<sup>40</sup> StarTimes, described as a private broadcaster, was a major player in the move from analog to digital terrestrial television broadcasts (DTT) in several African countries which needed the technological infrastructure to make the transition. Since the early 2010s, StarTimes had also entered the television market in Africa and was the main actor concretizing Xi’s ambitious pledge during FOCAC 2015 to make satellite television accessible to ten thousand African villages. Now it is quite difficult not to spot StarTimes posters, ads, or



branch access points in several African countries. It should also be noted that there is also a sub-forum which is part of FOCAC dedicated to media cooperation between China and Africa. The Media Forum is loosely structured based on FOCAC but with delegations bringing African ministers of communication, media civil servants, and selected reporters to China to sketch out media collaboration.

Influence through these various initiatives can take several shapes. First, installing digital infrastructure for African states wishing to transition to DTT opened up opportunities for Pang and other Chinese actors to rub shoulders with African leaderships. This means that intermediaries, be they Chinese state-owned enterprises or private companies, can increase their social capital by being able to accumulate experience and knowledge of working in African countries, learning about market needs, and influencing decision-makers and publics alike. Second, projects such as television access for 10,000 rural villages in Africa have the capability to promote the image of China as a peaceful development partner which cares not only about urban cities but also rural areas. Accessing television programming and advertising Chinese companies as the “good” ones that care about rural areas is a means to reach people directly and influence their perceptions of China. Third, diffusing China-centered content through various vehicles (including multiple languages, phone apps, and radio stations) in theory should enable Chinese media experts and leadership to advance China-centered perspectives on China’s role in Africa and in the world more broadly. To illustrate, a study found that in 2018, “in Kenya and Nigeria, between 7% and 8% of people said they had watched CGTN Africa sometime in the previous week. In South Africa, the number was 2%. That is far below the BBC, for example, which was a source of information for at least 20% of people.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite this limited outreach and on-ground marginal impact, China’s media influence in Africa is still viewed from a threat perspective for many. This is sometimes due to the evolving role of Chinese internet and telecommunications providers. In fact, none of the former actors are as famous (or notorious for some) as Huawei and ZTE. Huawei’s connection to issues of creating “backdoors” (supposed to mean surveillance and/or espionage) while wiring (government) buildings with internet and other tech equipment has become a recurrent topic of discussion by US senators and proponents of the sharp power framework alike.<sup>42</sup> The argument is that CPC-backed Huawei, through its digital infrastructure, enables authoritarian governments to pressure opposition groups, allows them to access, block, or hack into social media accounts of protest organizers, and youths demanding democracy and political reform.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, since the launch of Safe Cities and Smart Cities projects,<sup>44</sup> which are collaborations that would have Huawei/ZTE digital infrastructure intelligence gathering be shared with public safety and security administrations in recipient cities, concerns about the extent of Chinese influence in African governance have increased.<sup>45</sup>

Now the flip side of media as a conduit for influence is that Africans do also use media diplomacy to influence Chinese foreign policymakers. As stated by Fung et al., influence goes in different directions, including in unintentional ways where the

result can lead, inadvertently, to decreasing, not increasing, influence.<sup>46</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, when several African students were stranded in China due to strict lockdowns, student parents' associations, parliamentarians, activists, and others took to media platforms to express their discontent with the humanitarian situation imposed on African students and urge Beijing to take corrective measures. Another example can be found from following the advocacy work to curb poaching and ban trophy hunting. Advocacy groups in several African countries took to social media to get the attention, sympathy, and support of Chinese influencers and then policymakers. Social media and media as a mechanism for influence also work both ways; just as much as CPC officials can use media diplomacy for influence, relationally speaking, they will also be influenced through those same mediums.

### ***Influence Through Cultural Diplomacy***

There is a growing scholarship that examines China's cultural diplomacy in Africa, and CIs are a major player in this.<sup>47</sup> China's CIs were initially launched to teach Mandarin language and Chinese culture to international students. The first CIs were launched in 2004 in South Korea under the umbrella institution of *Hanban*. Since then, CIs have multiplied in number and diversity of locations where they are hosted. CIs are typically hosted in universities and teach Chinese language to college students, although there has also been a version of these institutes targeting high school students called Confucius classrooms. The first CI ever established in Africa was hosted by the University of Nairobi in Kenya in 2005 and has since then enrolled more than fifteen thousand students.<sup>48</sup> There are now around fifty CIs in Africa and over five hundred around the globe. Because they are perceived to be a tool of influence (again understood in a negative sense) used by the CPC to enhance its image and interests abroad at the expense of liberal values, CIs have faced a chain of cooperation terminations with several higher education institutions in Europe and North America.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the picture is a little different as CIs are welcomed by students and higher education administrators alike as the contexts behind establishing, funding, and staffing CIs differ greatly between African and European universities.<sup>50</sup>

CIs in African cities are characterized by being hosted in local universities such as Nairobi University, Addis Ababa University, Rhodes University, Cairo University, and so on. They are not located onsite with Chinese embassies' cultural sections or in fenced villas on capital cities' main boulevards. The location of CIs itself makes their exposure (to college students) much more accessible and people-oriented rather than alternatives with cultural institutes being so far removed from the public. Moreover, CIs in Africa typically rely on FOCAC-allocated funding. Such funding is typically used to renovate the physical space, hire Chinese language teachers, design relevant curricula, and budget for scholarships and exchange opportunities. Such flagrant asymmetry in funding, hiring, and curriculum design gives the Chinese side leverage during the decision-making process for where to establish CIs, which Chinese institution to partner with, and so on.

Cultural diplomacy, through CIs and other mechanisms, has been a focus of expanding CPC influence abroad since the early 2000s. During the sixteenth CPC Congress in 2002, the Head of the Central Propaganda Department, Li Yunshan, said that “the power of culture is becoming an important component in integrating national power and international competitiveness.” He added that the CPC’s goal is to make “socialist culture with Chinese characteristics a powerful attraction and inspiration not only to the Chinese people, but to the people throughout the world.”<sup>51</sup> In this way, CIs are meant to act as the business card which will showcase and market “socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.”

In Africa, Chinese CIs perform a variety of functions. They offer short- and long-term programs in Chinese, international Chinese language examinations, and Chinese business and culture courses for interested businesspeople. The institutes also typically hold many extracurricular activities such as Chinese traditional dance performances, film screenings, and art exhibitions, and they occasionally consult firms and individuals interested in China. In some cases, the CIs also serve as testing centers for scholarship competitions sponsored by the Chinese government. CIs also intensify network-building by acting as a bridge between Chinese enterprises based in Africa and African students who are learning Mandarin and who want to find a job. By holding cultural activities and basic language skill courses that are open to the general public, they also position themselves as “China’s business card” to the community more broadly and not only limiting their influence to elite circles. Through CI classrooms (based in high schools), the institutes are also varying their targeted age groups to include African youth.

Generally speaking, CIs are positively perceived in Africa, but the Mandarin language, despite being seen as an important language to learn, is still considered tough. From Afrobarometer survey results, we know that surveyed Africans still prefer to use English as an international language. In addition, since this chapter is advocating thinking about influence as a multidimensional and relational mechanism, Africans also influence Chinese foreign policymakers in the following ways: through exchanges sponsored by CIs, scholarships awarded to African students to study in China, and Africans have also been holding events to get more Chinese people to know their cultures, languages, and ideas.

### ***Influence Through Party-to-Party Diplomacy***

Beijing’s party-to-party exchanges with African political elites and senior cadres are a case in point for illustrating the relational approach to influence as well as the role of intermediaries and institutions in projecting influence. On the one hand, when the CPC trains low- and middle-ranking African military and diplomatic cadres, this can lead to exercising influence when these party officers become senior and take political actions that are in line with Beijing’s preferences (this is similar to the first two categories of influence in Goh’s typology).<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, providing thousands of training workshops to top political and military elites wields power and social capital because it multiplies the connections that Chinese government officials have with their African counterparts.<sup>53</sup>

In 2017, President Xi Jinping declared that over the next five years, “the CPC will invite political parties from around the world to send to China exchange visitors totaling 15,000 for more interactions.”<sup>54</sup> These party-to-party exchanges were intended by the Chinese government to disseminate China’s accumulated expertise about party-building and state governance, rather than to promote exchanges of information between Chinese officials and their visitors. Despite this asymmetry, the practice of party-to-party diplomacy functions to sharpen communication, strengthen understanding, and build, in President Xi’s words, “strategic mutual trust.”

Two institutions typify this mode of exercising influence abroad. The first is the International Department of the CPC (ID-CPC). The ID-CPC, originally constructed in 1951,<sup>55</sup> was formed to work directly with national liberation movements in Africa and communist parties across the globe.<sup>56</sup> In its seventy years, the ID-CPC “holds regular meetings with its foreign counterparts, provides training for foreign cadres, and sponsors part schools abroad” and “has contact with 400 parties in over 160 countries.”<sup>57</sup> As an institution, it “not only provides access to high-level decision-makers in formal government functions, but it also allows for engagement with influential political actors outside the realm of regular foreign affairs diplomacy, such as power-brokers operating behind the scenes or future political leaders.”<sup>58</sup> The second institution is the United Front Work Department (UFWD), a more porous “network of civic and business associations, student groups, Chinese-language media, academic institutions, and politicians, which is used to intimidate, surveil, and co-opt the overseas Chinese community.”<sup>59</sup> While the ID-CPC is very influential in Africa, UFWD does most of its work in the US, Europe, and Australia.

Elite capture in the early history of CPC’s relations with African nations had several ideological end-goals for Beijing, most prominently seeking the PRC’s recognition as the official government of China from as many states as possible and competing for influence in the Third World with the United Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This approach was politically profitable for Beijing, especially in Africa, where, between 1958 and 1964, “the CPC’s political outreach in Africa achieved impressive results.”<sup>60</sup> These results included the successful completion of “144 missions to African countries” and hosting “405 African delegations in China(…).”<sup>61</sup> Likely in part as a direct result, “by 1964, 15 of 35 independent African countries choosing to recognize Beijing, rather than Taipei – up from only seven in 1960.”<sup>62</sup>

In present times, the CPC’s strongest Party-to-Party relationship in Africa may well be with the African National Congress (ANC) party, which currently rules South Africa. South Africa only started a diplomatic relationship with the PRC in 1998 after a long stint of recognizing the Republic of China as the legitimate government of China, and China backed the South Africa Communist Party (SACP) rather than the ANC in the early Cold War.<sup>63</sup> Despite these initially distant positions, the ANC and the CCP now have a very close relationship.<sup>64</sup> Today, this relationship includes exchanges of youth party members between the ANC and the CCP, training seminars offered to members of the ANC in China, visits between

party delegations, and plans to build further interaction between Shanghai's China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong (CELAP) and the leadership of the ANC.<sup>65</sup> Several examples of the fruitfulness of these efforts can be highlighted. In 2012, fifty-six of the ANC's most senior leaders formed four classes at CELAP. The leaders reported learning significant information in a number of areas including but not limited to cadre training, political organization, and party structure.<sup>66</sup> Just before the elections in 2019, the ANC built up more party-to-party ties with the CCP, particularly looking to enhance their knowledge about managing election-time public relations and messaging campaigns. To serve this purpose, the Secretary General of the ANC, Ace Magashule, committed that the party would send "300 of its cadres to the CPC's training academy to learn about party discipline and loyalty" as well as propaganda diffusion and communication machinery.<sup>67</sup> On their part, the CPC treated these political trainings as a chance for their officials to "educate fraternal African political parties on China's experience in economic development and political governance."<sup>68</sup>

As the two parties developed their relationship, the CCP both inspired and financed the ANC's building of a party school for political leadership just outside of Johannesburg, in Venterskroon, in 2014.<sup>69</sup> ANC officials acknowledged a debt to Shanghai's CELAP in the design and structure of the school, where, at CELAP, "party members and foreign guests attend classes on 'revolutionary traditions,' learning everything from Marxist theory to media management."<sup>70</sup> China continues to maintain ties with other parties in South Africa as well, including the SACP. For example, in April of 2020, ID-CPC provided a virtual training workshop for the party's First Deputy General Secretary, Solly Mapailia, as well as twenty senior cadres from SACP.<sup>71</sup>

These frequent, diverse, and increasing party-to-party relationships matter significantly to China's foreign policy strategy as the International Department's mission "includes helping rectify foreigners' 'incorrect ideas'" about both the CPC and the country it governs, including, importantly, its positions "on issues of sovereignty."<sup>72</sup> The proliferation of party-to-party contacts in service of these public relations goals demands attention to the relationship between power and influence in the context of relational diplomacy. This is especially the case given that their explicit goal is influence in the form of changing others' ideas. At the same time, these party-to-party contacts serve to increase networking, diffuse norms, and produce knowledge, which has the effect of increasing China's social power. In this way, party-to-party exchanges show that influence relies on domestic institutions (local elites in African countries which seek emulating Chinese party schools) as well as on intermediaries who will at some point become decision-makers and can sway things in favor of or in line with Beijing's strategic interests.

## **Conclusion**

Influence is a capacious concept. Most people will know what influence is, but many will not be able to pinpoint exactly what causes influence or how it can be measured, especially in cases where policy preferences and interests align *a priori*.

In the study of International Relations, a growing body of scholarship has paid attention to understanding, situating, and to some extent operationalizing influence. However, in the advent of technological innovations, the digital economy, and due to the propagating use of artificial intelligence towards strategic ends, the study of influence is ever evolving. Moreover, with China's global outreach and Chinese actors variegating from state-owned to private enterprises passing by individual entrepreneurs, tourists, students, and migrants leaving their footprints all over the globe, understanding China's global influence necessitates a flexible approach that can allow for variance according to intentions, actors, and target country institutions.

By deploying the conceptual framework developed by Fung et al. (2023 and this volume), this chapter provided a broad overview of some of the crucial areas that can help us understand and unpack Beijing's influence mechanisms in Africa. Whereas typical frameworks of studying influence tend to focus on coercive power as the main mode of influence with the goal of ensuring that "self-interest and preferences are protected by altering other actors' preferences and behavior,"<sup>73</sup> this chapter demonstrates how influence is relational and how even the host or target actors of China's influence can themselves wield considerable influence over Chinese actors. Indeed, influence understood from a coercive power approach has limited analytical purchase when examining China–Africa relations. Instead, the chapter identified *guanxi*-building and social capital as important mechanisms of diffusing influence in China–Africa relations which allow for the African side to be represented as an agent with the capacity and will to influence Chinese counterparts. Future studies could enhance this analysis by examining reactions, challenges, and counterreactions of targeted African leaderships in order to further unpack China's global influence.

## Notes

- 1 See Amy Searight, "Countering China's Influence Operations: Lessons from Australia" (2020) CSIS Commentary <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-operations-lessons-australia>
- 2 See Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" (2018) 29(3) *Journal of Democracy* 9–23; Larry Diamond and Orville Schell (eds), *China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Hoover Press 2019).
- 3 For scholarship discussing the China threat vs. China opportunity debates see Lina Benabdallah, "Africa–Asia: A Tale of Worldmaking between Alterity and Contestation" (2024) 123(491) *African Affairs* 223–241.
- 4 See, for instance, the debate around the debt trap narrative which has been debunked by various scholars including Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme" (2020) 5(1) *Area Development and Policy* 1–14.
- 5 One can recall Rwanda's President Paul Kagame reflecting on US–China rivalry in Africa, sharing discomfort at being pulled to one side or the other, saying, "I don't think we need to be bullied into making choices between U.S. and China" <https://www.semafor.com/article/12/14/2022/rwanda-cant-be-bullied-into-choosing-between-us-and-china>
- 6 See for example Axel Dreher et al., *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China's Overseas Development Program* (Cambridge University Press 2022); Luke Patey, *How China Loses: The Pushback against Chinese Global Ambitions* (Oxford University Press

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## 2 Disaggregating ‘Chinese Influence’

### Concepts, Practices, and Effects of PRC Overseas Political Activities

*Andrew Chubb*

#### Introduction

How does the People’s Republic of China (PRC) advance its political interests inside liberal democracies, and what degree of influence has it generated? From 2017 onwards, a wide-ranging threat to the integrity of liberal democratic polities from ‘Chinese influence’ has become common in English-language policy discourse. Despite the analytic attention, however, the threat has remained ill-defined. Scholarly studies have mostly been limited to specific lines of activity, such as propaganda and public diplomacy, and have not accounted for the broader context of the PRC’s multifarious lines of overseas political work through both state actors and intermediaries. Media and policy commentary, meanwhile, has tended to aggregate these diverse activities into singular unifying frameworks that mask their varying motivations, actors, and degrees of success and coherence. This chapter seeks to disaggregate and evaluate this array of PRC political practices abroad.

The chapter’s analysis is structured around three key factors that shape the influence generated by PRC overseas political activities. As outlined in the Introduction and other chapters in this volume, these include the intentionality behind the influence generated, the role of intermediary actors in the process, and the conditioning institutions in the target country.<sup>1</sup> The chapter first addresses intentionality by cataloguing a set of core concepts that underpin PRC overseas political activities, primarily ‘United Front work’, ‘Overseas Chinese work’, ‘safeguarding state security’, ‘external propaganda’, and ‘liaison work’. The ideas that motivate the activities in question are crucial to assessing their intended effects and thus their degree of success. However, it is equally important to take account of the *intermediaries* involved, especially the ways in which their actions may reflect particular interests or distinctive views of the national interest. The chapter thus assesses each specific practice in terms of the actors that carry them out.

Ultimately, as the editors of this volume note, it is the responses of target country institutions that determine whether PRC overseas political activities generate influence. The third section of the chapter, focused on target country *institutions*, argues liberal democracies have been resistant to security and foreign policy-related influence, but permissive of PRC overseas political activities targeting Chinese dissidents, rights defenders, and other exiles. The result has been significant PRC influence constraining the exercise of basic civil and political rights by members

of diaspora communities overseas, in line with the party-state's intentions. In contrast, the PRC's attempts to influence liberal democracies' foreign and security policies have shown much less evidence of success. On the contrary, they have prompted a cascading process of securitisation that has been counterproductive to the PRC's goals and placed further pressures on Chinese diaspora communities.<sup>2</sup>

The scope of this chapter is limited to PRC overseas political activities in established liberal democratic polities with wide-ranging relations with China, such as the US, Australia, and European Union member states. Overseas political activities are defined here as *activities in support of a state's goals that attempt to influence the political environment in another country*. This scope includes activities carried out by both state agencies and non-state intermediaries, official personnel, and citizen supporters, and may take place in the territory of the home state, the target state, or a third country. The key criterion is the intention to generate a political effect conducive to the state's goals by influencing the political environment beyond the state's territorial borders. Under this definition, public diplomacy, understood as state communications directed at target countries' general publics, is included in the analysis. Conventional state-to-state diplomacy is excluded, as it seeks to directly shape the policies of the target government rather than influencing the political environment.<sup>3</sup> In short, the focus here is limited to the PRC party-state and its supporters and proxies' political activities.

### **PRC Overseas Political Activities: Academic and Policy Analyses**

Academic studies of PRC overseas political activities have been surprisingly rare given the explosive expansion of China's presence overseas in the post-1978 reform era. While high-profile recent developments such as the PRC's state-centric push for 'soft power' have been intensively examined, scholarly accounts of many key lines of party-state political activity tend to be scattered across works primarily focusing on other, narrower topics. Eftimiades' study of PRC intelligence work, for example, noted that suppressing Chinese dissident activity in foreign countries was an important component of PRC intelligence agencies' mission, arguing this constituted a distinguishing feature of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intelligence – albeit one common to the Kuomintang (KMT) prior to Taiwan's democratisation.<sup>4</sup> Chen's study of the overseas Chinese democracy movement has borne this claim out from the opposite empirical angle, detailing the impact on the movement from suspected CCP infiltration.<sup>5</sup> Being focused on particular lines of CCP activity and their effects, such works have not attempted to situate such activities within the broader set of state practices the CCP carries out in democracies.

Prompted by then-CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao's seemingly incongruous embrace of the liberal IR concept of soft power at the 2007 CCP Congress, scholars have intensively examined China's recent attempts at boosting its image abroad. Ding's early analysis argued the PRC was using soft power as a means of smoothing an otherwise dangerous power transition.<sup>6</sup> In a broad assessment of the PRC's global image-building efforts in 2015, Shambaugh argued the PRC had failed to generate any meaningful improvement in global public opinion.<sup>7</sup> Gorfinkel and

Chubb found ostensibly foreign-directed 'soft power' projects promoting Chinese language to foreign audiences quickly became overtaken by considerations of how to burnish the PRC's image among *domestic* audiences.<sup>8</sup> Other studies have similarly found PRC soft power initiatives to be significantly domestically-oriented.<sup>9</sup>

Two particular lines of PRC overseas soft power activity have attracted significant academic attention: the PRC's foreign-directed propaganda campaigns, and its cultural and educational outreach projects, especially Confucius Institutes (CIs). Edney found Beijing's approach to foreign-directed propaganda serves the party's domestic propaganda goals due to the institutional integration between domestic and foreign propaganda organs.<sup>10</sup> Yamada's sources within the Chinese government's propaganda system noted that building soft power among foreign audiences would depend on significantly looser political controls on foreign-oriented reporting as distinct from domestic.<sup>11</sup> Brady found the estimated US\$7 billion the PRC injected into English-language propaganda from 2009 onwards had limited effect on foreign overall opinions of China, but had significantly shaped foreign discourse on Taiwan, and elevated the PRC's economic profile.<sup>12</sup> Mattingly et al.'s survey experiment found evidence PRC state media messaging has more general persuasive effects, increasing the proportion of respondents who viewed China's domestic governance model positively.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly given their physical presence on university campuses, Confucius Institutes, the PRC's language and cultural education and promotion centres, have been the subject of a large number of academic studies. Multiple authors have pointed out the political nature of their mission, particularly in *avoiding* political topics deemed controversial by the ruling party.<sup>14</sup> But studies of their effectiveness in improving China's image have found decidedly mixed results due to the conditioning effects of domestic institutions in the target country.<sup>15</sup> Zhou and Luk argued the perception of CIs as propaganda tools and threats to academic freedom generated a backlash that made them counterproductive; Luqiu and McCarthy, in contrast, have highlighted the considerable success of the CI model in integrating the PRC government's programme with local institutions of higher education.<sup>16</sup> Brazys and Dukalskis estimated the tone of local media coverage of China warmed by an average of 6% after CIs were introduced. The study, based on Google's GDELT data, was global in scope and did not disaggregate the effect by region.<sup>17</sup> Effectiveness might be expected to vary significantly from country to country, or region to region. Surveys of US school students attending Confucius Classrooms, for example, found no pro-China effect on their views.<sup>18</sup>

The seminal recent academic work on PRC overseas political activities is To's study of the CCP's 'Overseas Chinese work', a line of activity first described by Wang Gungwu in the early 1980s.<sup>19</sup> To adopts a 'statist-corporatist' theoretical perspective, in which 'a centralized state apparatus with a top-down mode of operation [is] supplemented with a wide range of decentralized intermediary structures for participation'.<sup>20</sup> Overall, To concludes that the CCP's OC work is 'a systematic and coherent apparatus of persuasion and influence', pointing to numerous specific examples of influence within the diaspora that are both intended at the central party-state level *and* contributed to by intermediaries such as local business



and community figures. In line with this volume's emphasis on the conditioning effect of domestic *institutions* in the target country on actual influence generated, To details how domestic institutional circumstances in most target countries have become favourable with the withering of the once-dominant rival KMT Overseas Chinese work apparatus, and the new wave of outward migration of Mainland Chinese who tend to be educated in the PRC school system and more likely to align with the CCP's political values. As this chapter shows, in other areas of PRC overseas political work beyond the diaspora, domestic institutions have been far less favourable to the PRC, resulting in wide variation in the degrees of success from one area of activity to another.

In sum, academic analyses of the PRC's overseas political activities have offered detailed 'core samples' of CCP party political work within democracies and beyond, but without dedicating much analytic attention to the overall context created by the PRC's multifarious lines of activity. In contrast, many English-language policy think tank works have sought to identify a unifying thread linking the totality of Beijing's overseas influencing activities. Diamond and Schell argued the PRC's political activities were increasingly influential across all levels of government, mapping the 'Chinese Influence Operations Bureaucracy'.<sup>21</sup> The report's sprawling organisational map drew various horizontal linkages between different bureaucracies, though without providing specific discussion to substantiate the existence of such linkages. Indeed, the map's many disparate branches illustrate vividly the absence of any organised coordinating bureaucracy behind the CCP's various missions to influence overseas political processes.<sup>22</sup>

Several think tank works have focused on the CCP's United Front work, a topic mostly neglected in the academic literature. Joske argues the CCP's 'United Front system' links together education, diplomacy, intelligence, and 'political warfare', constituting an 'exportation of the CCP's political system' into liberal democracies.<sup>23</sup> Brady's influential 2017 conference paper focused on New Zealand characterised the PRC's 'United Front activities' as encompassing co-optation, lobbying, propaganda and espionage.<sup>24</sup> Turning to questions of success, Parelllo-Plesner and Li argued that in Australia and New Zealand 'political, media, and business life have been pierced by the United Front, leading to Beijing's almost complete takeover of Chinese-language media in the two countries'.<sup>25</sup> Such arguments have often emphasised that the CCP operates a ministerial-level United Front Work Department, and Xi Jinping has personally reinvigorated United Front work, but slide between discussing (1) United Front Work Department, a highly institutionalised party institution; (2) United Front as a strategy or approach of attempting to win people over that all CCP members are formally responsible for; and (3) the intended results of United Front work, which are PRC-friendly discourse and political action.<sup>26</sup>

Some works in the policy-oriented literature have attempted to distinguish the PRC's specific areas of activity, but a common weakness is a lack of attention to assessing, if not measuring, the degree of PRC influence actually generated. Schrader distinguishes various components of the PRC's political influence 'toolkit': weaponised economic ties, manipulation of information, co-opting elite

intermediaries and the Chinese diaspora. However, the framework describes, rather than critically assessing the results of, such tactics. As in many think tank and media works, influence is more of a presumed result than the subject of empirical investigation.<sup>27</sup> Benner et al. break down PRC 'influencing activities' into three target areas – political elites, media, and intellectuals – but do not assess the significance of the influence that follows from such activities. They argue that the PRC is 'not just "at [Europe's] gates" – it is now already well within them'.<sup>28</sup> Walker and Ludwig, likewise, equate the PRC's overseas political activities with a new form of influence: 'sharp power'. The report did not define the concept according to effects, or liberal-democratic yardsticks of acceptable activity, instead distinguishing malign 'sharp power' from benign 'soft power' by reference to the authoritarian identity of the state identified as responsible for them.<sup>29</sup>

A common feature of media and think tank analyses has been the aggregation of various kinds of PRC political activities into single overarching schemes. Hamilton's influential polemic, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*, knitted together mass spying, pro-PRC activism and protest, United Front-aligned diaspora groups, Chinese students, lobbying by PRC-invested trade interests and many more distinct state and non-state activities into a purposeful 'silent invasion'.<sup>30</sup> A June 2017 TV segment aired on *Four Corners*, ABC's flagship investigative journalism programme similarly weaved together espionage cases with various political activities ranging from co-optation and lobbying to coercion of dissidents, control of Chinese-language media and campus activities of overseas Chinese student groups into a coherent network of 'power and influence'.<sup>31</sup> An extensive accompanying feature headlined 'China's Operation Australia', presented a further expanded array of activities as a coordinated state operation.<sup>32</sup>

The array of journalistic and policy-oriented analyses of PRC political activities in liberal democracies shows the opposite general shortcoming to the academic studies reviewed above. Many academic studies have argued over appropriate measures of effectiveness and not adequately contextualised the particular lines of party-state political work with reference to its broader suite of activities designed to exert political influence. But policy-oriented works have tended to assume PRC political activities are, or are likely to be, successful rather than tackling the challenges of measuring influence while projecting a level of coordination and coherence beyond what the evidence supports. The following sections disaggregate the various intentions behind PRC overseas political activities, the actors who implement them, and the extent to which they have succeeded in generating influence on the target states' political environment.

### PRC Concepts of Overseas Political Activities

Intentionality is crucial to recognising and measuring influence. Concepts, in turn, are central to understanding intentionality. As Runciman recommends, concepts used in social science should at least be consistent with the actors' own understandings of the meaning of their actions.<sup>33</sup> As laid out below, the CCP's overseas political activities are authorised and motivated by a diverse set of concepts

including 'United Front work', 'Overseas Chinese work', 'public diplomacy', military and civilian 'liaison work', 'foreign-directed propaganda', and 'disintegration of the enemy'. Within the CCP's own policymaking systems, United Front work, Overseas Chinese work, and liaison work have particular specialised bureaucracies responsible for their implementation. A number of other concepts also inform PRC activities outside China's borders, bringing involvement from other parts of the party-state and intermediaries beyond.

### ***United Front Work*** (统一战线工作)

United Front is a Leninist concept of tactical alliances whose relevance to overseas political activities Xi Jinping himself has repeatedly emphasised.<sup>34</sup> The immediate targets of the party's United Front work are individuals and groups that the CCP considers 'patriotic' but not necessarily committed ideological allies. These include intellectuals, capitalists, religious and minority ethnic groups, and more recently, professionals and overseas students.<sup>35</sup> In return for aligning with the CCP's goals, these individuals and groups – which can include friendly foreigners – stand to gain prestige, connections, and a degree of privileged access into the PRC political system. As Gerry Groot observes, the United Front system enables 'corporatist co-optation' of otherwise potentially dangerous elements into the system, helping both to control and leverage such groups' knowledge, skills, and connections. This fundamental ambivalence is embodied in the privileged, but arms-length, 'consultative' role granted to members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the party-state's peak United Front body.<sup>36</sup>

The goals towards which this CCP alliance management system has been directed have undergone several important evolutions since its inception. As a result, its current role cannot necessarily be interpreted directly through the lens of its past activities. In the 1920s and 1930s, the CCP pursued two periods of 'United Front' alignment with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) against the warlords and Japanese invaders respectively. In the Chinese Civil War after 1945, by contrast, United Front work served to isolate and subvert Chiang's regime, and is seen to have made a major contribution to the CCP's victory. Following two decades of relative inactivity following the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Cultural Revolution, United Front work was reconstituted after 1978 to serve the PRC's economic construction.<sup>37</sup>

Since the early 1980s, United Front work has aimed at cultivating 'patriotic' links with non-party elements in the service of PRC goals. As specified in Article 2 of the CCP Central Committee's 2021 regulations on United Front work, the United Front that the party seeks to create refers to

the Chinese Communist Party-led, worker-peasant-based, alliance including all socialist workers, socialist entrepreneurs, patriots who defend socialism, and patriots who defend the unity of the ancestral land and strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Article 3 specifies the key tasks of United Front work to include 'developing the broadest patriotic united front' and supporting the realisation of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' – implying nationalistic goals rather than ideological subversion, except in territories the PRC claims sovereignty over. But Article 3 also calls for 'the maintenance of social *harmony* and *stability* and safeguarding the state's *sovereignty*, *security* and development interests'.<sup>38</sup> The italicised language indicates how United Front work also entails the suppression of dissent against CCP rule over territories to which it lays claim, notably Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

United Front work is formally overseen by the Central Committee United Front Work Department and subordinate United Front bureaucracies at the provincial and municipal levels. However, it is formally the responsibility of every party member to cultivate non-CCP members. It has been central to the CCP's promotion of cross-straits ties and opposition to independence in Taiwan, and for its management of Hong Kong's affairs. Beyond this scope, United Front work involves promoting economic cooperation with the PRC, fomenting opposition to anti-CCP dissent, and building support for 'reunification' with Taiwan and other key PRC foreign policy positions – a function that has expanded in recent years.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Overseas Chinese Work*** (侨务工作)

An overlapping party-state concept is 'Overseas Chinese' work, or the management of the PRC's relations with diaspora communities around the world. This too has domestic and international dimensions, being concerned with both the management of relations with ethnic Chinese who return to the PRC from abroad, and with communities located in foreign countries. Like its predecessors, the Qing Empire and the Kuomintang-ruled Republic of China (ROC), the PRC has sought, via its diaspora policy, to stifle dissent and neutralise political threats from overseas Chinese communities. However, it has also long focused on the goal of drawing in overseas Chinese capital and skills for the PRC's economic development, especially since the reform era.

The effectiveness of PRC Overseas Chinese work has been greatly aided since the 1990s by the drawing down of the rival ROC Overseas Chinese work bureaucracy that accompanied 'Taiwanisation', as well as the greater receptiveness of more recent generations of émigrés to PRC political appeals.<sup>40</sup> The PRC's Overseas Chinese work bureaucracy was subsumed under the United Front Work Department in 2018, indicating the party-state leadership's desire to increase coordination and control of both internal and external United Front work. As detailed below, other party-state concepts mandate overseas political activities to be implemented by better-known bureaucracies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), and CCP propaganda units. In many cases, however, these may be understood as the respective ministries' contributions to United Front and Overseas Chinese work.

***State Security*** (国家安全)

China's MSS conducts overseas operations aimed at actively forestalling political threats. This has included infiltrating and disrupting dissident organisations, and putting under surveillance key target groups such as overseas students.<sup>41</sup> The MSS has a 'Foreign Security and Reconnaissance Bureau' (对外保防侦察局) responsible for such tasks.<sup>42</sup> The ministry's Social Investigation Bureau (社会调查局) has been responsible for overseas political influence operations aimed at elevating benign views of China's strategic intentions through overseas front organisations and think tanks. Joske characterises these as vehicles enabling MSS officers' overseas security work, as well as influence operations in their own right aimed at persuading foreign elites to adopt friendly policies.<sup>43</sup> The latter function can be understood as representing the MSS's 'contributions to the CCP's United Front work system'.<sup>44</sup>

Despite its ostensibly domestic remit, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS; 公安部) has been an equally and perhaps even more prominent implementer of the party-state's state security work overseas. Digital communications technologies now enable PRC police officers to directly intimidate overseas-based critics and ethnic minority groups, including by harassing their families in China. Recent first-hand reports have identified the Ministry's 'Political Protection Bureau' (政治安全保卫局) as running specific operations to surveil and disrupt dissident groups abroad, and 'persuade' overseas fugitives to return to China, often through threats to their family.<sup>45</sup> Local branches of the Ministry have also established 'overseas police service centers'.<sup>46</sup> A further suggestion that the MPS's role in overseas state security activities has been expanding in recent years is the dropping of 'internal' (国内) from the Political Protection Bureau's former name around 2019.<sup>47</sup>

***'Public Diplomacy'*** (公共外交)

A responsibility of the Foreign Ministry, the PRC party-state's concept of public diplomacy contrasts with the English-language concept of the same name, as it concerns communication with both domestic and international audiences regarding foreign policy issues. As outlined by former top foreign policy official Yang Jiechi, the concept of public diplomacy covers the full range of the Foreign Ministry's public-facing activities, from the design of public imagery of leaders' official visits to senior diplomats' media appearances, symposia and open days at the ministry, and its routine press conferences and information releases during international crisis situations.<sup>48</sup> This vast, diverse scope makes it difficult to disentangle messages intended for domestic audiences from those intended for international consumption, increasing the challenges of identifying intentionality.<sup>49</sup> However, Foreign Ministry officials affirm that building 'discourse power' (话语权) is a primary goal of their public-facing activities, implying a privileging of the quantitative expansion of the reach of China's 'voice' over the qualitative attenuation of message content.<sup>50</sup> This provides a clear point of crossover with the propaganda system's concept of external propaganda.

***Foreign-Directed Propaganda (对外宣传)***

Counterintuitively, foreign-directed propaganda (often translated as 'external propaganda') is a narrower concept than public diplomacy. While the latter includes domestic Chinese audiences, external propaganda refers unambiguously to mass communications directed at non-Chinese audiences, usually in non-Chinese languages.<sup>51</sup> Such propaganda work ('publicity' is the party-state's preferred translation) is carried out by various units of the propaganda and ideological system, particularly those that have received massive injections of capital since Hu Jintao announced a major external propaganda drive in the late 2000s. These external propaganda units primarily include China's English-language media, such as China Global Television, China Radio International, China Daily, as well as the Global Times, which differs from the state-controlled, but partly commercially oriented, Chinese-language tabloid of the same name.

***Liaison Work (联络工作)***

CCP 'international liaison work', carried out by the International Liaison Department, refers to the CCP's outreach to foreign political organisations and individuals, particularly socialist and communist parties, but also other organisations and persons, particularly those considered fraternal.<sup>52</sup> As such, it combines elements of diplomacy, lobbying, and public diplomacy. However, a separate line of military liaison work also proceeds in parallel. Military liaison work refers primarily to the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s efforts to engage and influence high-level counterparts in the defence and security establishments of foreign polities, especially Taiwan, through its own Political Work Department's Liaison Bureau.<sup>53</sup>

Many of the activities mandated by the above-mentioned set of concepts overlap with each other, and with United Front and Overseas Chinese work. This list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the significant variety of party-state overseas political activities that exist. Importantly, each of the activities discussed is carried out by the party-state, but the political behaviours that they induce – if successful – may or may not be. This introduces the role of non-state intermediaries in the generation of political influence overseas, in some cases making intentionality and attribution challenging, as discussed below.

***Disaggregating 'Chinese Influence'***

What specific political influencing tactics has the PRC party-state deployed in liberal-democratic political settings, through which channels or intermediaries, and with what effects? Examining eight specific practices, this section illustrates the limitations of understanding PRC political activities by reference to intentions only. In many cases, activity is directly attributable to state agencies, but in many others, non-state intermediaries have discernibly been in the driver's seat, and in others still, the state's role has been one of responding supportively to the initiative

of lower-level bureaucratic actors or even citizens. The actual level of influence generated, meanwhile, has depended fundamentally on the responses of the target states' institutions. While national security and political institutions have generally been resistant to PRC influence, a near-total absence of responses from domestic human rights protection institutions, coupled with difficulties in law enforcement, has resulted in a permissive environment that has facilitated significant repressive influence within targeted diaspora communities overseas.

### ***Electoral Manipulation***

The PRC's interest in electoral outcomes in liberal democracies dates back at least as far as the mid-1990s, when PLA-linked money was channeled into the Democratic National Committee. However, the level of engagement appears to have been inconsistent across time. In the lead-up to the 2020 US presidential election, senior officials in Donald Trump's administration claimed, without providing evidence, that Beijing was attempting to influence the election via cyber intrusions and co-opted state and local-level leaders.<sup>54</sup> US intelligence officers reportedly resisted attempts by Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe, a Trump ally, to force a stronger emphasis on China in a classified post-election report to Congress.<sup>55</sup> However, during the 2018 mid-term election campaigns, Beijing did engage in targeted public diplomacy against Trump's tariffs, aimed at rural Republican-voting regions.<sup>56</sup> This demonstrated that the CCP party-state's propaganda strategists are giving close consideration to the potential electoral implications of their activities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that PRC central security and foreign affairs bureaucracies may also perceive a possibility of influencing foreign electoral voting. Leaked intelligence reports from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) in 2022 reportedly accused PRC diplomatic missions of covertly channelling funds to multiple election candidates in favour of the incumbent Liberal party.<sup>57</sup> In a 2017 meeting with senior Australian Labor Party figures, CCP security chief Meng Jianzhu allegedly suggested Beijing might discourage members of the Chinese diaspora from supporting the then-Australian opposition party if it did not support the bilateral extradition treaty it was seeking.<sup>58</sup> Contrary to Meng's reported insinuation, however, it is unlikely that the diverse overseas Chinese communities, which include many of the party-state's staunchest opponents, would be open to manipulation as a voting bloc.<sup>59</sup>

PRC central propaganda and security agencies have technical and institutional capabilities for influencing political content on online media platforms popular overseas such as WeChat and TikTok.<sup>60</sup> Local governments' propaganda and security forces could also seek to shape electorally relevant information circulating on such platforms. A particular source of vulnerability arises from liberal democratic governments and political parties' use of such social media platforms as tools for public diplomacy and political campaigning.<sup>61</sup> In some cases, foreign politicians have had content directly censored from their PRC-hosted social media accounts on WeChat.<sup>62</sup> An equal or greater concern for foreign governments has been the

possibility that, having invested in building a following on such platforms, politicians and parties may find incentives to steer clear of political content that could result in their accounts being closed or suspended. This creates the potential for PRC authorities to instrumentalise foreign politicians and their constituents as intermediaries of influence.

### ***Lobbying***

As China's economy has boomed, the financial means and overseas interests of both the PRC party-state and intermediaries such as Chinese enterprises have grown rapidly. At the same time, the Xi era has brought increased emphasis on political control and Leninist institutional penetration (party-building) and co-optation of non-party actors (United Front work), increasing the necessity for enterprises and organisations to cooperate with the party-state. In these circumstances, PRC economic actors' cultivation of relationships with politicians, donations to political parties and the employment of former officials and politicians in consulting and advocacy roles have assumed sharper political dimensions.

In the United States, the PRC embassy has spent at least several million dollars on professional lobbying firms that conduct mediated outreach to congressional representatives.<sup>63</sup> The efficacy of such efforts, however, appears limited given the long-term tendency for Congress to adopt more critical positions towards the PRC than the executive branch of the US government. Local political institutions have exerted sharp constraints on the degree of actual influence generated by the PRC's lobbying, a point further illustrated below.

In Australia, donations to political parties from PRC-aligned business figures have generated significant concern from security agencies.<sup>64</sup> Senator Sam Dastyari was forced to resign from the front bench in 2016 after donations and in-kind payments from pro-PRC tycoons appeared to influence his comments on policy issues, including a reported comment describing the South China Sea dispute as 'China's own affair'.<sup>65</sup> In an apparent attempt to convert such donations into policy influence, one of Dastyari's benefactors, Huang Xiangmo, reportedly threatened to withdraw a US\$400,000 donation to the Australian Labor Party after its defence spokesperson called for Australian naval patrols in the South China Sea in 2016.<sup>66</sup> However, Dastyari also immediately renounced the comments as soon as they were reported in English. The case thus serves to illustrate both the extent of, and the constraints on, the ability of the PRC's United Front intermediaries to exert influence on politicians in Australia.

PRC companies' appointments of former politicians in lobbying roles have unsurprisingly been followed by public advocacy of policy positions preferred by Beijing on issues such as joining the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation with PRC propaganda organs, and Huawei's involvement in 5G network construction.<sup>67</sup> An individual's adoption of policy positions preferred by a foreign state may of course reflect sincerely held views of the national interest. Nonetheless, the provision of material benefits to people with special knowledge of, and access to, political institutions provides opportunities for covert influence within democratic



systems, especially if the arrangements are not transparently disclosed and understood by citizens.

### *Transnational Repression*

The CCP has attempted to stifle overseas critics using coercive techniques throughout its period of rule, and especially since the violent crackdown on student-led protests in 1989. Well-documented methods include threatening members of the target's family in China, denial of visas to critics seeking to visit their families, and intimidation through conspicuous surveillance.<sup>68</sup> Beijing has also signalled that anti-CCP activities or speech outside China can entail permanent exile by detaining numerous prominent overseas diaspora critics who have set foot in the PRC. The case of Swedish-Chinese bookseller Gui Minhai, seized from Hong Kong in 2016, and the arrest of Chinese-born academic Yang Hengjun, held since January 2019 and recently charged with vague offences against state security, project strong threats of punishment for political activities conducted outside the PRC's borders.<sup>69</sup>

Modern communications technologies, such as instant messaging and video calling, have created new possibilities for extra-territorial political coercion.<sup>70</sup> This may have elevated the importance of the MPS, once regarded as China's domestic police ministry, in overseas political work. A PRC student in Australia received video calls from police in China who were with her family, ordering her to desist from political activism including mocking Xi on Twitter and participating in rallies in support of Hong Kong's protest movement. At one point, a local MPS officer explicitly told the activist, 'although you are [in Australia], you are still governed by the law of China'.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Uighurs and other ethnic groups have faced technology-enabled surveillance and intimidation by PRC police services after fleeing repressive policies.<sup>72</sup>

The PRC's success in interfering with the exercise of political rights that are nominally protected in liberal democracies reflects a general institutional weakness in liberal democracies with multicultural societies. Members of other diaspora communities have faced similar encroachments on their fundamental rights from authoritarian regimes, including Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, and Rwanda, which have all attempted to suppress critics abroad, sometimes using brute force, in recent years.<sup>73</sup> In stark contrast to the resistance that liberal democracies' political and national security institutions have shown in response to PRC attempts to influence foreign and security policy, local law enforcement has been slow to respond and often lacked necessary powers,<sup>74</sup> and national human rights commissions have so far been absent from efforts to tackle transnational repression.<sup>75</sup>

### *Control of Overseas Chinese Media*

In recent decades, overseas-based Chinese-language media have become much less willing to criticise the party-state, or cover topics Beijing considers politically sensitive, than they once were.<sup>76</sup> PRC propaganda organs have developed a 'borrowed boat' method where they channel propaganda content through established overseas

media outlets by entering into partnerships with local traditional and online media entrepreneurs.<sup>77</sup> In the Xi era, PRC security agencies have intensified their existing efforts to pressure local businesses to withdraw advertising from overseas Chinese media outlets that criticise CCP policy.<sup>78</sup> In many traditional media markets, the only alternative to PRC propaganda is the Epoch Times, which is aligned with the Falun Gong religious organisation and, more recently, far-right causes.<sup>79</sup> The Chinese-language traditional media landscapes have consequently suffered from a deficit of independent content.

The rise of social media platforms as news delivery mechanisms has exacerbated these issues by enabling direct and indirect PRC censorship of overseas media content. Central authorities in Beijing possess the capability to compel censorship on the PRC-based social media platforms, notably WeChat, that many overseas Chinese media depend upon for content distribution. More routinely, Beijing's policies also intentionally require proactive censorship by the companies that run the platforms, such as WeChat's owner, Tencent, and Weibo's parent company, Sina.<sup>80</sup> In turn, news organisations using such platforms may feel a need to steer clear of certain subjects, views and individuals, lest their account – with valuable audiences of followers – be suspended.

Several interacting factors have contributed to this example of effective PRC overseas influence. First, the PRC's United Front, Overseas Chinese work, state security, and propaganda bureaucracies have established a powerful combination of 'carrots' and 'sticks' that shape the political information supply of diaspora Chinese speakers. But other key factors have much less to do with the PRC's intentional policies. One is the chronic institutional lack of funding available for credible, independent local journalism in the Chinese language, commensurate with the size of overseas Chinese communities, in target countries.<sup>81</sup> Another is the changing demographic makeup of overseas Chinese communities with the influx of recent arrivals from Mainland China, which has created more receptive audiences for politically sanitised, PRC-friendly content.<sup>82</sup> Once again, then, local domestic institutions have been key facilitators of the PRC's influence.

### ***Co-Optation of Local Organisations***

The CCP United Front Work Department, fronted by the China Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful National Reunification (中国和平统一促进会) and its 90-plus regional subordinate associations (CPPRCs) worldwide, has become increasingly visible in asserting pro-PRC political positions overseas, particularly in the Xi era.<sup>83</sup> They serve simultaneously as umbrellas designed to 'unify' local overseas Chinese community groups and as platforms for lobbying. The two roles complement each other. As umbrella organisations, they offer smaller local Chinese community groups the opportunity to become affiliates, which can provide the smaller groups' members with an entry point into business and social networks inside and outside China, and the PRC's diplomatic outposts and the United Front and Overseas Chinese work systems within China. As platforms, they claim to represent 'the' Chinese community in voicing pro-PRC positions on issues

of importance to Beijing, while cultivating ties with political elites and building goodwill towards the party through philanthropy.

Recent years have brought a proliferation of local United Front-aligned intermediary groups claiming to represent a vast array of religious, hometown and professional sub-groups within Chinese diaspora communities.<sup>84</sup> Australia's CPPRC listed 81 branches and affiliated member groups as of late 2017, and more than 150 groups signed on to its statement denouncing Hong Kong's protest movement in 2019.<sup>85</sup> The UK's peak CPPRC body (全英華人華僑中國統一促進會), known in English as the 'UK Promotion of China Re-Unification Society', brought out 113 groups as co-signatories to a 2016 pro-PRC statement on Hong Kong.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, some long-established independent Chinese community associations, such as the Chinese Benevolent Society of Vancouver, have come under the control of pro-Beijing leadership, often through democratic internal processes.<sup>87</sup>

The success of Beijing's efforts to secure political alignment from Chinese community organisations is not simply a function of the clear and intentional intensification of United Front and Overseas Chinese in Xi Jinping's 'New Era'.<sup>88</sup> It is also, fundamentally, a result of the PRC's increased economic size, which has boosted overseas Chinese businesses' motivations to operate in Mainland China. Another factor has been the withering of the ROC's Overseas Chinese bureaucracy after 'Taiwanisation', which has prompted many formerly pro-ROC overseas groups to turn to the PRC for support.<sup>89</sup> And like the changing audience profile for overseas Chinese media content discussed above, it also reflects newer migrants' use for, and in some cases economic dependence on, United Front-aligned associations to access the commercial benefits of connections with local CCP authorities in China.<sup>90</sup> Once again, however, the key condition for the success of the PRC's efforts to co-opt overseas organisations into its United Front has been the receptiveness of local institutions.

Freedom of association is a basic institution of liberal democracy, though the right to political information may require that organisational affiliations with foreign states be publicly disclosed. The PRC's United Front system presents challenges in this regard. The CCPPRC is officially a 'United Front work system unit' (统战系统单位), so its subordinate country-level CPPRCs can be understood unambiguously as United Front organisations.<sup>91</sup> However, their dozens or even hundreds of member organisations may be a step further removed, as affiliates of a CCP front organisation, rather than CCP front organisations themselves. Indeed, many continue to serve as mutual-assistance societies for Chinese migrants, providing vital social support functions and business opportunities to members who may lack opportunities and skills to operate in the mainstream of the host society. Where the party-state is involved in setting up or resourcing such organisations, the right to political information mandates that this be publicly declared. Beyond this, however, constraining most United Front-linked organisations' activities would undermine freedom of association, leaving liberal democratic institutions fundamentally receptive to this form of influence.

A similar dynamic has prevailed in higher education institutions. Like many authoritarian states, PRC authorities have long sought to monitor political activities

Table 2.1 Types of United Front organisation

| <i>Organisations</i>                                                                                                             | <i>Relationship to party-state</i>      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| CCP Central United Front Work Department 中共中央统一战线工作部                                                                             | CCP party centre                        |
| China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification 中国和平统一促进会                                                     | CCP United Front work system unit       |
| (Regional / Country) Councils for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (地方)中国和平统一促进会                             | CCP overseas United Front organisations |
| Local member groups and affiliates of regional or country CPPRCs: hometown, professional, trade, religious etc. community groups | United Front-affiliated organisations   |

of Chinese students overseas, particularly since the 1989 Tiananmen protest movement. It is unclear how wide-ranging the CCP's channels of political reporting on overseas students are today, but there is sufficient evidence to confirm that the practice does occur. In some cases this potential for such punitive or coercive disclosures has been openly leveraged as intimidation, with participants in pro-PRC demonstrations threatening to report opponents to PRC authorities. The much-scrutinised Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA), PRC embassy-affiliated campus social and pastoral groups, may have been involved in monitoring dissent in some locations. However, the CSSA's relationships with the party-state, and degree of politicisation, vary significantly from branch to branch – and within branches across time, depending on the individuals involved. Temporary CCP branches have also been established abroad to monitor and control groups of exchange students at overseas universities. Many local higher education institutions have been permissive environments for such lines of party-state activity (Table 2.1).<sup>92</sup>

Due to variation in local English-language translations, the English names shown above are the author's translation of the Chinese-language names (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 Degrees of CCP affiliation of United Front-aligned groups.

***Protests and Other Direct Action***

PRC supporters, both state-organised and spontaneous, have taken public direct actions in support of the PRC government's positions on various issues in recent years. Typical examples have included mobilisations to neutralise protests by Tibetan activists and Falun Gong supporters during diplomatic visits by CCP leaders; demonstrations against unfavourable international developments such as the international arbitration ruling on the South China Sea issue in July 2016; and counter-protests against pro-Hong Kong activism in 2019. In some cases, PRC supporters have mobilised direct action to prevent public events on issues they consider offensive.<sup>93</sup> At Durham University in 2018, for example, overseas PRC students complained to the Chinese embassy about a debating society event featuring a speaker supportive of Falun Gong. The embassy then phoned the debating society to express its 'serious concerns' and warned the event could harm UK–China ties.<sup>94</sup> Despite this coercive threat – implemented by the party-state itself in response to information from intermediaries – the debate went ahead as planned. The activities of the PRC and its intermediaries were unsuccessful in producing influence on that occasion, but other instances have seen local institutions themselves become PRC influence intermediaries.<sup>95</sup> The ratio of successful and unsuccessful cases is hard to assess given the problem of silent evidence.

These types of political mobilisations result from both general and specific factors. On one hand, China's consular authorities have in recent years become more willing to encourage the expression of patriotic sentiments among citizens and supporters overseas. After pro-PRC counter-protesters disrupted a pro-Hong Kong rally at the University of Queensland in 2019, for example, the local PRC Consulate-General praised the action as 'patriotic'.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, while debates persist over the prevalence and depth of nationalism among China's population, there is no doubt PRC citizens are increasingly wealthy, mobile, politically aware, and confident to express political views. This has provided the party-state with a wider group of potential intermediaries for asserting its political positions abroad.<sup>97</sup> Finally, new technologies have created innovative forms of political coercion, whether by state security agents or intermediaries. This can include the obtrusive filming of public events, which can intimidate targets by implicitly communicating threats of punishment by foreign authorities.<sup>98</sup>

Liberal democratic institutions are often permissive to political influence via direct action. Overseas supporters of many foreign governments – including authoritarian regimes – exercise the core democratic right of political expression through protest and public speech.<sup>99</sup> Two fundamental distinctions exist. *Spontaneous* mobilisations that occur without the state's material support or direction and do not interfere with others' rights are entirely permissible from the perspective of liberal-democratic institutions; in fact, these are exercises of core freedoms in a liberal democracy. *State-directed* actions are also permitted, provided they do not suppress others' exercises of rights, but states such as Australia and the UK have legislated additional disclosure requirements. *Suppressive* protest actions have proven a more tractable target, with the UK legislating against foreign interference against

the exercise of basic rights listed in the European Convention on Human Rights, and the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation bringing a series of cases against alleged PRC agents and intermediaries accused of surveilling and interfering with dissidents on US soil.<sup>100</sup>

### *Propaganda*

In contrast with the cash-starved media landscape in many liberal democracies, CCP English-language propaganda outlets have received large injections of funds since 2009. Some estimates run as high as US\$10 billion.<sup>101</sup> In this context, numerous media organisations have signed cooperation and content sharing agreements with CCP propaganda organs. Most commonly this has resulted in the insertion of multi-page colour advertorial supplements about China provided by CCP propaganda organs.<sup>102</sup> In 2018 the PRC attempted to mobilise US domestic opposition to the Trump administration's trade war using this channel.<sup>103</sup> Canadian intelligence services have reported that PRC consulate staff interfered in the country's 2019 and 2021 elections by providing transport to international students to cast votes for favoured candidates and using media to attack candidates critical of the Chinese party-state.<sup>104</sup>

Liberal-democratic societies are in theory defined by a principle of tolerance of opposing political viewpoints, meaning they are generally permissive of foreign state propaganda. But there is so far little evidence that income streams from propaganda inserts have influenced regular English-language coverage, where both professional imperatives and market incentives favour negative coverage. In Australia, Fairfax Media, owned by Nine Entertainment Co., has taken a strong critical line on many PRC-related issues in recent years despite running *China Daily* inserts until December 2020.<sup>105</sup> In the UK, there are signs that COVID-19 has prompted media outlets to reconsider their deals with PRC propaganda organs.<sup>106</sup> However, the PRC's state-led propaganda drive has been limited in its success, with favourability towards the PRC crashing in developed countries in recent years.<sup>107</sup> Despite the protections for freedom of speech providing a permissive environment for propaganda activities, other mainstream liberal democratic institutions such as the media and public opinion have proven generally resistant to PRC influence.<sup>108</sup>

One group of exceptions warrants particular note. Agreements enabling media organisations access to the PRC news and information market have, on occasions, neutralised some media organisations' resistance to censorship.<sup>109</sup> Such agreements are likely to be tacitly or explicitly conditional on self-censorship by media organisations. There is evidence of actual influence being exerted via this intermediary channel. For example, after signing an agreement with the Shanghai Media Group in 2014, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation launched a website aimed at PRC audiences that avoided sensitive political topics, notably including the 4 June 1989 massacre in Beijing. In a dark irony, the agreement had been signed on the 25th anniversary of that violent crackdown.<sup>110</sup> As with many of the issues already discussed, the impact of such agreements falls disproportionately on those

of diaspora groups: PRC authorities have tended to be more censorious towards Chinese-language content than that in English or other languages.

### *Inducement of Self-Censorship*

The PRC has stepped up pressure on public and private institutions to modify their language to align with orthodox CCP views of Taiwan and other issues, and to avoid activities related to 'sensitive' political subjects. In 2018, PRC state agencies issued a series of demands for companies with commercial interests in the party to modify errant website nomenclature. In one case, consular officials persuaded a local council in Queensland to erase an ROC flag painted by a local school pupil from a piece of public artwork.<sup>111</sup> Such pressure may have had a deterrent effect on the institutions in question, or on other institutions. In 2017–18 the Royal Court Theatre in London suspended a play on life in contemporary Tibet following advice from the British Council that it could jeopardise the theatre's ability to operate in China and cooperate with PRC artists.<sup>112</sup> In 2019 and 2020, several Australian venues backed away from hosting academic and artistic events on issues deemed 'sensitive' by Beijing, and a Canadian pride parade disinvited Hong Kong activists.<sup>113</sup>

The actual success rate of such PRC attempts at exerting political pressure is difficult to measure; successful cases are non-events, so the evidence may be hard to observe. But the documentary record is decidedly mixed. Numerous PRC campaigns have failed spectacularly, drawing major negative publicity.<sup>114</sup> Others have raised major additional attention and sympathy for the critics the PRC or its supporters sought to silence.<sup>115</sup> Yet there is little doubt that the increased economic heft of the PRC and its increasingly mobile citizens has increased the material incentives for foreign actors to comply with – or even anticipate – Beijing's demands for limits on speech. As with many of the issues discussed above, this poses a disproportionate risk to the free speech rights of the Greater Chinese diaspora, especially PRC political dissidents, ethnic minorities, and those from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Academic self-censorship – alterations to research agendas or presentations due to political considerations – can occur on an organisational or individual level. On the organisational level, publishers that carry academics' work have shown some susceptibility to the kinds of political pressures the PRC has brought to bear on other companies with commercial interests in China (as discussed above). For example, in 2017 academic and commercial publishers, including Springer Nature and Cambridge University Press (CUP), complied with PRC government orders to censor content for users in China. While CUP eventually reversed its decision following an international outcry, Springer Nature's decision remains in place.<sup>116</sup>

On the individual level, there are a wide range of family, research and ethical reasons why individual academics – and indeed think tank researchers, commentators and journalists – may choose to avoid sensitive topics or soften public criticism of Beijing.<sup>117</sup> Two European academics reportedly refused to publish an article in an academic journal alongside a paper they regarded as too controversial.<sup>118</sup> In a

2018 survey of China researchers, more than 15% said they had decided against pursuing a research project due to its sensitivity, and 24% said they had adjusted a project's focus, in many cases in consideration of the safety of others. In total, 70% of respondents agreed that 'self-censorship is a problem in the China field'.<sup>119</sup> Liberal-democratic institutions of higher education have so far not provided the specialised support necessary to resist such influence.<sup>120</sup>

The PRC's efforts to control discussion inside and outside China are the proximate cause of self-censorship, but a lack of institutional support mechanisms is an important factor. The above-mentioned survey of China scholars found nearly 10% had been interviewed by PRC police about their research, and around 5% had experienced trouble obtaining visas over the preceding decade. But the survey also found 'none' to be the most common response regarding the support they received from their institutions in dealing with the Chinese government.<sup>121</sup> Researchers with family in the PRC can face major additional risks to exercising normal academic freedoms that neither universities nor liberal-democratic governments have so far attempted to mitigate.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to disaggregate the PRC's overseas political activities in liberal democracies, by reference to the concepts that inform and authorise them, the actors involved in implementing them and the degree of success with which they have met in generating political effects. The study points to a clear contrast between the significant, intentional effects the PRC's activities have generated on the exercise of basic civil liberties and human rights by targets in diaspora communities on the one hand, and the much less obvious effects on liberal democracies' national security and foreign policies on the other. Democracies' national security institutions, media and political classes have, for the most part, proven strongly resistant to PRC influence, but their human rights protection institutions, and in many cases law enforcement services, have been permissive of PRC extra-territorial repression against exiled dissidents and persecuted minority communities regarded as posing threats to PRC state security.

In his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language', George Orwell made an impassioned plea for precision in political discourse against a proliferation of vague and malleable set phrases.<sup>122</sup> The tendency of English-language policy discourse to apply singular notions of 'Chinese influence' – overlooking the varied intentions, intermediaries and role of local institutions in determining influence – may be useful for rallying resistance from national security and foreign policy bureaucracies, but as this chapter indicates, they have offered little traction in the protection of individuals' and communities' rights in a liberal democratic context. As a classic work on public policy problem definition has noted, the definition of problems influences how the qualitative nature of a problem is understood, the causes that give rise to it, the broader associations that audiences will draw, and ultimately, for better or worse, the design of public policy solutions.<sup>123</sup>



## Notes

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## **Part III**

# **Intermediaries**





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### 3 Hirschmanesque Effects

#### Typology, Scope Conditions, and a Case Study of the Koizumi Administration's China Policy

*Ronan Tse-min Fu*

##### Introduction

As China continues its climb to economic prominence, now proudly wielding the title of the world's second-largest economy, its economic influence extends across the globe. This influence is not just economic, but also political – its effects echo through every corner of the world, met with varying degrees of enthusiasm and skepticism. A growing body of scholarship posits that countries entwined in intricate economic ties with China increasingly find themselves aligning with Beijing's stance on vital foreign policy matters, or at the very least, veer away from policies that may displease China and risk compromising these lucrative trade relations.<sup>1</sup> However, an intriguing question persists: how does China adroitly leverage its economic heft to accrue political clout?

Several studies have shed light on the principal causal mechanisms that facilitate China's conversion of economic relationships into political influence.<sup>2</sup> This chapter intends to explore one such mechanism known as the "Hirschmanesque" effects, in which a nation's economic reliance on China cultivates vested interests that encourage amicable relations with China and discourage any foreign policy that could potentially ruffle Beijing's feathers.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite a burgeoning body of research, the conditions under which Hirschmanesque effects occur remain an open question, with the only general agreement being that they tend to emerge in asymmetric dyadic relationships.<sup>4</sup>

To determine whether and how Hirschmanesque effects influence state behavior, we need a robust theoretical framework. My contribution in this chapter is twofold: firstly, I argue that it is analytically advantageous to categorize Hirschmanesque effects into three distinct types: soft lobbying, hard lobbying, and policy reversal. Each effect is distinguished by the intensity and focus of the actions taken by interest groups, reflecting the benefits derived from their economic relationships with China.

Secondly, I outline the scope conditions under which each of these Hirschmanesque effects is likely to occur. I propose that soft lobbying merely requires economic interdependence; hard lobbying comes into play when there is an impending threat of future trade loss due to dependency on China; and a policy reversal requires a more nuanced set of circumstances, including an influential interest group and flexible government leadership.

Although a full-scale empirical examination of the mechanisms and scope conditions of the Hirschmanesque effects is beyond the scope of this chapter, I use the Japan–China relationship during Koizumi Junichiro’s tenure as a litmus test, focusing particularly on the contentious issue of his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The case study will demonstrate that only soft lobbying occurred, as the scope conditions for hard lobbying and policy reversal were not met.

Despite Japan’s deepening economic ties with China since the early 1990s, Tokyo’s foreign policy accommodation toward Beijing has not seen a parallel progression. This discrepancy is especially conspicuous during Koizumi’s tenure when his persistent visits to the Yasukuni Shrine from 2001 to 2006 sparked outrage in Beijing. It raises an important question: why did the commercial considerations fail to temper Koizumi’s actions despite Japan’s economic reliance on China?

Methodologically, Koizumi’s actions offer a compelling “negative case” for studying the overarching theories of economic interdependence and political conflict reduction, and more specifically, the study of Hirschmanesque effects.<sup>5</sup> The Japanese case thus allows for a more precise determination of the conditions under which the hypothesized causal relationships might hold.

This chapter extends the conceptual framework presented by Fung et al. (2023), particularly their emphasis on intermediaries in conditioning China’s influence.<sup>6</sup> By applying this framework to the Koizumi-era case, we gain deeper insights into the mechanisms and limitations of China’s economic leverage, while also refining the theoretical framework itself. This historical case study, though not recent, provides valuable insights into the enduring dynamics of how China translates economic relationships into political leverage. By examining a period when China’s economic clout was rapidly growing but not yet at its current level, we can isolate key factors that enable or constrain the conversion of economic ties into political influence – factors that remain relevant in contemporary cases of Chinese economic statecraft.

This chapter is structured in the following way: the next section reviews the current literature on the subject, followed by the third section which introduces a new typology of Hirschmanesque effects and discusses the conditions that might govern their occurrence. The fourth section examines the Japanese case in detail, and the final section concludes with a discussion on the broader implications of this study and potential areas for future research.

### **The Political Consequences of Economic Ties**

Economic relationships possess a profound capacity to produce far-reaching impacts on the direction and implementation of foreign policies. A burgeoning body of academic literature is dedicated to scrutinizing the extent to which the People’s Republic of China, through its strategic utilization of economic instruments, exerts influence over the foreign policies of other nations. This influence, subtle yet undeniable, forms the foundation upon which global dynamics continue to shift.

In a similar vein, Strüver launched a comprehensive analysis into the determinants of voting behavior among United Nations (UN) member states in the UN General Assembly. His insightful examination revealed that an amalgamation of political institutional similarities, military exchanges, and diplomatic communications could significantly augment the likelihood of these UN members casting their votes in favor of China across a myriad of UN resolutions. Strüver postulated that China is actively pursuing a strategy to foster convergence in foreign policy stances across its bilateral relationships, leveraging its economic might as an influential catalyst.<sup>7</sup>

However, not all scholars agree on the extent and specificity of this economic influence. Scott Kastner, for instance, posited a more restrictive theory. He hypothesized that although trade relations with China could stimulate political convergence, the impact is limited primarily to economic issues, casting doubts on the pervasive nature of China's economic statecraft.<sup>8</sup>

The theoretical scaffolding of this growing discourse is deeply embedded within the academic exploration of economic statecraft – a systematic study that delves into the mechanisms through which economic power can be translated into substantial political influence.

With the progression of globalization, nations are becoming intricately intertwined through complex economic networks. As a result, a mutual alignment of interests naturally emerges, leading to an anticipated convergence in foreign policy stances. The larger the trade volumes, the stronger the expectation for harmonized foreign policies across nations.<sup>9</sup> This is predominantly because disparities in foreign policy can provoke retaliatory economic sanctions, thereby inflicting substantial interest losses. Consequently, nations are economically incentivized to preempt the onset of international disputes by aligning their foreign policies.<sup>10</sup> In essence, the greater the volume of trade between nations, the stronger the compulsion to maintain stable trade relations, which usually transpires alongside the nurturing of amicable political relations.

The literature on economic statecraft underpins the concept that a powerful nation can deploy its considerable economic resources as a tool to coax compliance from other nations, thereby acquiring political leverage.<sup>11</sup> This strategy gives birth to an “exchange relationship” between the dominant nation and its less powerful counterparts. Neil Richardson captures this idea succinctly, stating, “[T]he foreign policy behavior of dependencies is viewed as partial payment in exchange for the maintenance of benefits they derive from their economic ties to the dominant country.”<sup>12</sup> This statement encapsulates how commercial ties can potentially temper political behavior, outlining the mechanism by which economic power is transformed into political influence along this distinct causal pathway.

### **Hirschmanesque Effects: Typology and Scope Conditions**

In particular circumstances, the art of wielding influence manifests as a deeply rooted political process that necessitates the involvement of domestic intermediaries. In this matrix, business interest groups rise to prominence as essential

“domestic mediators” or “conduits of influence.”<sup>13</sup> Or in Courtney Fung, Enze Han, Kai Quek, and Austin Strange’s terminology, these business groups can be considered as “domestic institutions” within a host country.<sup>14</sup> This procedure, eloquently characterized by scholars as embodying Hirschmanesque logic or producing Hirschmanesque effects, fundamentally alludes to the phenomenon whereby intricate economic linkages stimulate the germination of influential interest groups within foreign nations. Such entities ardently advocate for the cultivation and maintenance of stable, peaceful relations with their trading partners.

This phenomenon is fueled by liberal economic exchanges that intensify the dependency of private businesses on foreign markets. Given these businesses’ vested interest in counteracting any foreign policies that could potentially harm their commercial prospects, they naturally lean toward governmental policies that actively sidestep interstate disputes and are prompt in rectifying policies that threaten their economic stakes. As Ikenberry and Mastanduno astutely observed, “domestic interest groups with a stake in interdependence constrain the ability of the state to act autonomously.”<sup>15</sup> Such vested interest groups have the potential to morph into an influential “commercial fifth column,” with the capacity to reshape government policies in ways that transcend traditional domestic pressures. As trade expands, these vested interests, reaping benefits from the trade, become increasingly vocal and conspicuous in their advocacy for stable bilateral relations and enhanced foreign policy coordination.

However, the current conceptual framework of Hirschmanesque effects is fraught with a couple of analytical quandaries. Firstly, it presupposes that harmonious relations are the sole guarantors of continued trade flows, and that any political tensions will invariably precipitate adverse economic ramifications. This assumption overlooks the insights proffered by the “business as usual” school in the contentious debate over the intersection of political tensions and economic relations.<sup>16</sup> While it is undeniable that political conflict can occasionally cripple bilateral trade, this is not a constant; vested interests may choose to remain inactive in mitigating political conflict if they discern no impending threat to their economic relations.

Secondly, the original construction of Hirschmanesque effects encapsulates three distinct facets that can be analytically disentangled: (1) an explicit predilection for stable and peaceful relations with the trade partner; (2) a strategy of pressuring the government to avoid policies that might ignite political controversy; and (3) the readjustment of government policies ensuing from actions initiated by vested interests. The analytical acuity is significantly heightened by disaggregating Hirschmanesque effects into these individual impacts, given that each requires distinct actions that are not necessarily undertaken concurrently. For instance, a business group advocating for harmonious relations with China may not necessarily confront their government over politically contentious policies marring Japan–China relations. To address these limitations, I propose the classification of Hirschmanesque effects into three discrete impacts: soft lobbying, hard lobbying, and policy reversal. These terms are derived from the three aforementioned components, and this categorization helps circumvent the first analytical pitfall inherent in the traditional treatment of Hirschmanesque effects.

The term “soft lobbying” refers to the actions undertaken by business groups that reap the benefits from economic ties with China when they advocate for the fostering of friendly relations with China, without engaging in or pinpointing political issues that might provoke their government. Given that soft lobbying does not entail any definite political risks, it can be postulated that its activation is predicated merely on the existence of economic interdependence.

“Hard lobbying,” on the other hand, corresponds to the vociferous opposition of interest groups against specific government policies, their efforts to deter or rectify undesired governmental behavior, even at the risk of alienating the government. Consequently, hard lobbying imposes greater costs than its softer counterpart. To differentiate this effect from policy reversal, the third impact, it is postulated that hard lobbying does not necessarily result in tangible policy modification. As hard lobbying potentially courts government antagonism, it is likely to surface only when business groups have endured actual trade losses due to deteriorating political relations, or when they anticipate future trade losses if the government’s policy remains unaltered.

“Policy reversal” pertains to instances where unwanted government policies are either not enacted or rectified primarily due to the actions of interest groups that are heavily invested in economic ties with China. It indicates that, under appropriate circumstances, these groups possess the motivation and capacity to keep their government in check. The realization of policy reversal is, however, a demanding task as it necessitates the interest group to be willing to take action, propelled by their reliance on Chinese economic ties and the expectation of future trade loss, and to possess adequate political capital to influence the government. It also requires that the government leader does not have a significant stake in the policy that the interest group seeks to modify. If the leader has already accrued audience costs in the issue area, and if the public is opposed to policy alteration, policy reversal becomes unlikely. Therefore, policy reversal is likely to be an infrequent occurrence as multiple conditions must be fulfilled to achieve this outcome. This underscores the complex reality that the conversion of trade and investment into political influence is not a straightforward, linear process.

As such, this chapter significantly extends the “intermediaries” aspect of Fung et al. (2023)’s “Three I’s” framework by proposing a detailed typology of intermediary behaviors, specifically in the context of business groups’ lobbying activities. By categorizing lobbying into soft, hard, and policy reversal types, each with distinct scope conditions, we provide a more granular and predictive model of how intermediaries operate in the influence process.

### **Dissecting the China Policy of the Koizumi Administration**

Before embarking on an exploration of the impact that business groups had on Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s China policy and his decisions regarding the Yasukuni Shrine, a deeper understanding of the fundamental aspects of economic relations between Japan and China can provide a useful contextual framework. Notably, Japan’s trade and investment relationship with China held significant

sway even before Koizumi assumed office in 2001. Indeed, Japan was instrumental in China's progression along the path of its reform and opening-up policy. When the pragmatic leader Deng Xiaoping sought to chart the trajectory of China's economic development, he turned to Japan as a model. It was following his visit to Japan that Deng opted to implement the reform and opening-up policy.<sup>17</sup> Japan's commercial engagement with China amplified dramatically once China embarked on this transformative journey. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, trade between Japan and China leaped from \$1.04 billion in 1972 to an impressive \$296.2 billion in 2015. During the tenure of the Koizumi administration, this bilateral trade saw a doubling over merely six years. Throughout Koizumi's time in office, China retained its position as Japan's second-largest trading partner. In this period, Japan's exports to China constituted a critical component of the nation's economic framework and were largely responsible for its longest period of economic recovery post-World War II, prior to the onslaught of the 2007 financial crisis.

As for investment, Japan's investment in China started from a modest \$0.41 billion in 1990, which increased to \$0.93 billion in 2000 and surged to \$6.58 billion by 2005. As Figure 3.2 elucidates, from 1987 to 2017, Japan's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to China demonstrated an unequivocal upward trend. Figure 3.3 sheds light on the relative significance of Japan's investment in China, representing it as a proportion of its total FDI. Beginning at a mere 1%, by 2004, at its zenith, Japan's investment in China accounted for 19% of its total global investment. While Japan's FDI in China could not quite match the prominence of its FDI in the United States, the allure of the Chinese market for Japanese businesspeople remains potent. The potential scale of the Chinese market and its value as a production base continue to entice Japanese businessmen. Generally, the two economies are largely complementary, a fact acknowledged by Prime Minister Koizumi in his

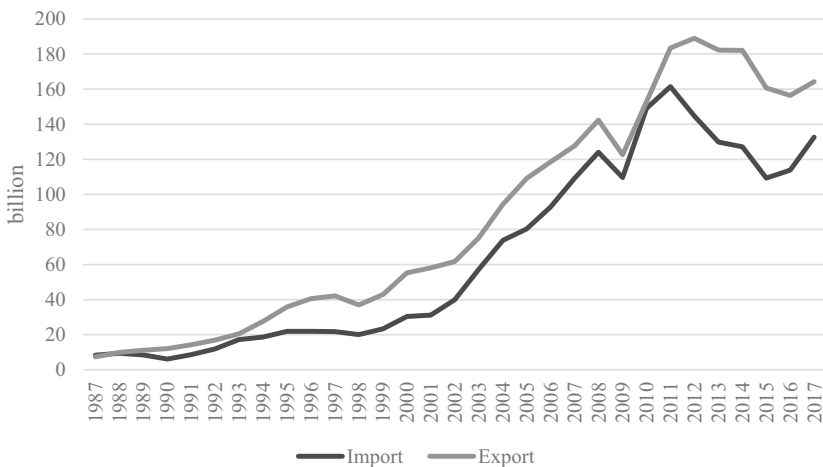


Figure 3.1 Trade between Japan and China, 1987–2017.

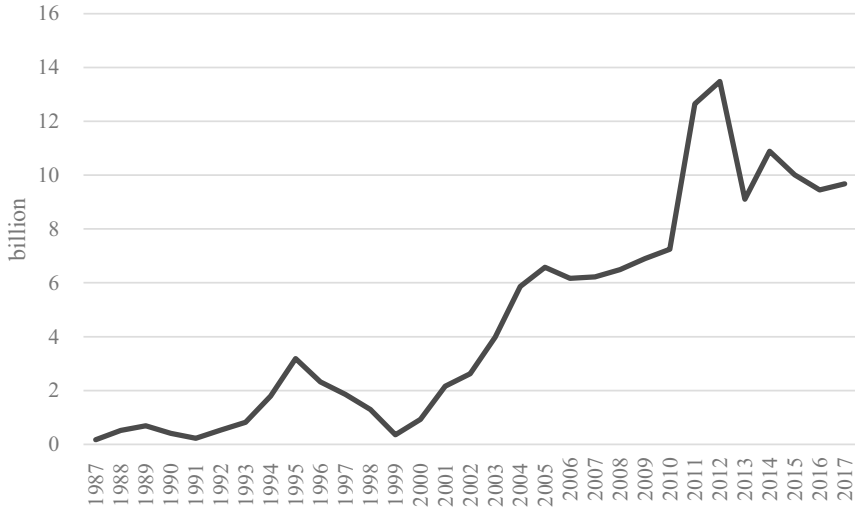


Figure 3.2 Japan's direct investment in China.

speech at the Boao Forum, stating, "Some see the economic development of China as a threat. I do not. I believe that its dynamic economic development presents challenges as well as opportunities for Japan... Since there are differences in our industrial structures, Japan and China can strengthen their mutually complementary bilateral economic relations."<sup>18</sup>

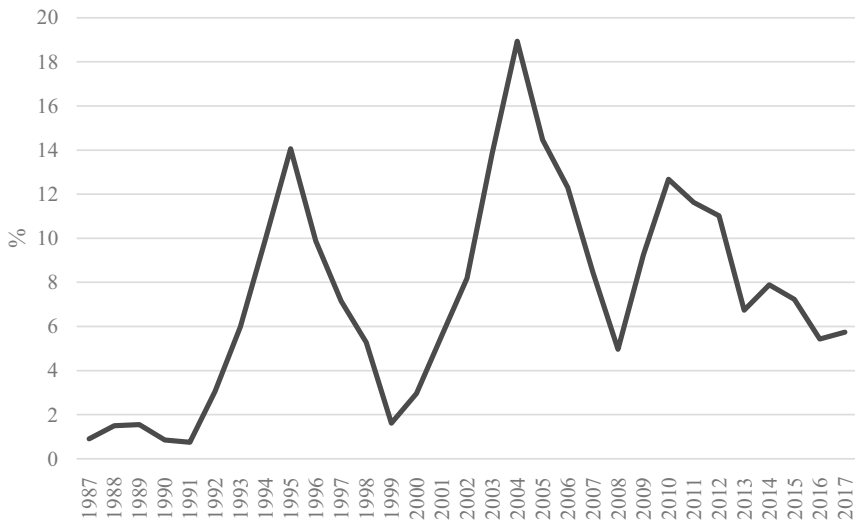


Figure 3.3 Percentage of Japan's investment in China in terms of total FDI.



To be sure, China's rapid economic ascent has posed threats to some Japanese industries, which are not globally competitive due to higher labor costs. This led to apprehensions among some business leaders about the potential "hollowing out" of their industries. However, these concerns eventually faded as China's economic growth became an important impetus for Japan's economy, particularly its economic recovery since the early 2000s. The swift expansion of demand in China served as a significant boon to the Japanese economy. In general, China has been portrayed more as an economic opportunity than an economic threat for Japan, at least starting in the 2000s.<sup>19</sup>

### *Japanese Business Groups and Koizumi's Visits to the Yasukuni Shrine*

While the economic relations between Japan and China flourish, a palpable tension persists in their political dynamics. This juxtaposition raises a pivotal inquiry: why hasn't the escalating economic interdependence culminated in a more conciliatory political stance from Tokyo toward Beijing? Our exploration will focus on the roles of two significant business groups, integral elements in the causal mechanisms at play.

It is crucial to discern whether the Hirschmanesque effects – characterized by soft lobbying, hard lobbying, and policy reversals – played a role in shaping Japan's policy decisions. The theory posits that when a nation becomes economically dependent on another, its domestic business community will likely lobby against any policies that could sour relations with the more dominant partner. Extending this theory to Japan's intricate economic ties with China suggests that Japanese entrepreneurs, especially those with substantial commercial stakes in China, might harbor concerns about any provocative actions by Tokyo that could alienate Beijing. Such apprehensions, if present, would invariably be communicated to Japanese policymakers, potentially propelling them to recalibrate controversial decisions and align Japan's political course more favorably with China's preferences.

There are indeed observable signs of this subtle lobbying effect. It is clear that numerous Japanese businesses and social groups with a direct stake in the economic relationship with China tend to laud and advocate for moderation and pragmatism in Japan–China relations. For instance, in February 2001, Keidanren (the Japan Business Federation), the most influential business lobby in Japan, published a report outlining recommendations for enhancing Japan–China relations in the new century. This reflects Keidanren's preference for controversy-free policies, an example of soft lobbying per the Hirschmanesque effects framework. Medeiros and his colleagues also discovered that, in general, Japanese business groups support a friendlier relationship with China in the hope of ensuring stable Sino-Japanese relations and uninterrupted trade.<sup>20</sup>

The Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo, commemorates Japan's war dead but is controversial due to its inclusion of war criminals from WWII. Many Asian countries, particularly China and South Korea, view visits to the shrine by

Japanese officials as an endorsement of Japan's wartime aggression. During the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election in April 2001, Koizumi, understanding its symbolic value to a section of the Japanese populace, pledged to conduct annual Yasukuni Shrine visits if elected. This promise was aimed at securing support from the Bereaved Families Association, which carries nearly ten thousand votes in the presidential election and has been advocating for a prime ministerial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine since 1985. This pledge by Koizumi stood in stark contrast to the stance of his competitor, Hashimoto Ryutaro, a former chairman of the Bereaved Families Association, who maintained he would abstain from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. Koizumi's pledge, in effect, invoked significant audience costs as it involved committing to shrine visits.<sup>21</sup> In a way, Koizumi had generated considerable audience costs through his promised shrine visits.

Koizumi did fulfill his pledge after becoming prime minister, making his inaugural visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on August 13, 2001, which exacerbated Tokyo's relations with Beijing. In subsequent reports pertaining to China, Keidanren appealed to the Japanese and Chinese governments to foster better communication channels among private companies and government offices to facilitate improved business ties. However, Keidanren did not specifically advocate for Tokyo to take proactive steps to alleviate the political tension in the bilateral relationship.<sup>22</sup>

After the anti-Japanese protests in China in the spring of 2005, the Chinese government attempted to persuade Koizumi to refrain from his annual Yasukuni Shrine visit that year. Instead of expressing Chinese official concern about the potential negative impact of a prime ministerial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine or emphasizing that the Yasukuni visit was a sensitive political issue for Chinese people, this time, Beijing adopted a novel approach.<sup>23</sup> Believing that Keidanren could influence the Koizumi administration, the Chinese Ambassador to Japan, Wang Yi, invited Keidanren President Okuda Hiroshi and the entire staff of Keidanren's China committee to Beijing on August 16 to discuss bilateral relations improvement with Chinese President Hu Jintao.<sup>24</sup> Okuda initially declined Wang's invitation, as he did not want to leave the Japanese public with the impression that he was attempting to influence Koizumi's policy at the Chinese government's request. However, he later agreed to a rescheduling of the talks for September 30. On this date, Okuda was joined by several top Japanese business leaders in Beijing, where they were requested by President Hu to discourage Koizumi from visiting the shrine. For the first time since Koizumi's term began, Hu explicitly linked the Yasukuni visits as a hindrance to economic relations and explicitly mentioned how they could potentially obstruct China's cooperation with Japanese business groups in lucrative economic projects:

China needs Japan's economic cooperation... and would like to develop amicable relations into the future. China would like to introduce Japanese technology for its planned bullet-train railway line, and also work with Japan on energy conservation and environmental technologies, to foster more balanced economic growth. However, the prime minister's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine have become an obstacle.<sup>25</sup>

After the meeting with President Hu, Okuda relayed Hu's discontent with Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. Regardless of this, Koizumi decided to visit the shrine two weeks after his meeting with Okuda.<sup>26</sup> In 2006, Mitarai Fujio succeeded Okuda as Keidanren's president. In an interview with *Bungei Shunju* published in August 2006, Mitarai stated that Keidanren did not have any sway on the prime minister's decision to visit the shrine. He remarked, "In reality, Japan-China trade figures have continued to increase, and there has been no influence on economic activity." He held the belief that it was best for business groups to abstain from engaging in contested political issues to avoid exacerbating the situation.<sup>27</sup>

In summary, Keidanren, the principal interest group representing Japanese businesses, neither critically scrutinized Koizumi's policies toward China concerning the Yasukuni Shrine visits nor exerted any significant influence to temper them. Now, we shift our focus to another influential Japanese business group.

In a report issued in April 2003, Keizai Doyukai (the Japan Association of Corporate Executives; henceforth referred to as Doyukai), another important albeit slightly less powerful business interest group, voiced support for accommodative policies toward China.<sup>28</sup> The report asserted that China understood its need for cooperation with other nations and would strive to establish healthy relations with its neighbors. It proposed that the Japanese government should facilitate this process by deepening dialogue with China. However, akin to the March 2003 Keidanren report, this Doyukai report did not identify specific discussion topics, nor did it specifically implicate the Japanese government as the party that should take the initiative in facilitating his dialogue.

In November 2004, Kitashiro Kakutaro, Doyukai chairman, expressed his opinion that the majority of the business community felt that Prime Minister Koizumi should abstain from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>29</sup> Kitashiro contended that Koizumi's visit could "undermine the ability of Japanese companies to do business in China."<sup>30</sup> News reports indicated Kitashiro's concerns that Japanese business groups would miss out on the opportunity to participate in a highly profitable bullet-train railway line project in China.<sup>31</sup>

Two years later, Doyukai explicitly confronted the government's stance regarding Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. In a proposal written in April 2006, directed explicitly at the governments of China and Japan, Doyukai urged the Japanese government to act autonomously and affirmatively to resolve the problem by discontinuing the visits. According to the proposal, the visits were impeding the resumption of bilateral exchanges at the summit level and impacting Japan's standing in international society. Although the proposal acknowledged that Koizumi's visits to the shrine were intended to mourn and pay respect to the war dead, who were compelled to go to war for their families and country, and were made with the intention of preventing such a tragic war from recurring, Doyukai nonetheless concluded that the visits were inappropriate due to the lack of broad consensus among Japanese citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Despite being divisive within Doyukai, this proposal was still presented to the Japanese government. Koizumi immediately dismissed the proposal, and some LDP politicians even accused Doyukai of prioritizing financial profit over respect for Japan's independence. In response to this strong backlash, Kitashiro quickly

apologized to Koizumi for the political uproar caused by the proposal. In the end, the proposal's political impact on Koizumi was, at best, minimal.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Why Hard Lobbying and Policy Reversal Effects Did Not Materialize***

The conspicuous absence of a coordinated lobbying effort by Japanese commercial entities against Koizumi's stance invites examination under the theoretical prism presented in this research. This framework posits that domestic cohorts with significant influence would marshal their political capital to counter government policies only when faced with an evident economic vulnerability and when strategic assessments indicate a favorable outcome from intervention.

In the milieu of the Japan–China dynamic, empirical evidence underscores the notable absence of these conditions, thereby forestalling the manifestation of impactful lobbying. Despite deeper economic ties, Japanese business entities perceived a minimal risk to their ventures in China from the political frictions during Koizumi's leadership. This relative equanimity can be traced back to two foundational rationales.

Firstly, Japanese corporate leaders maintained unwavering dialogues with their Chinese counterparts, undaunted by the ambient political tensions.<sup>34</sup> Even as friction arose from Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, Beijing's reproaches were strategically directed at Koizumi, sparing Japanese enterprises from direct diplomatic fallout.<sup>35</sup> This demarcation insulated Japanese businesses, allowing them to perceive their vested interests in China as immune to the ambient political dissonance.

Secondly, a prevailing conviction within Japanese commercial circles held that China's ascent was intrinsically linked to sustained Japanese economic collaboration.<sup>36</sup> This sentiment was continually reinforced by Chinese officials who, despite their critiques of Koizumi's actions, consistently emphasized the indispensability of bilateral economic cooperation. Such overtures engendered a belief that China would prioritize economic pragmatism over punitive measures, irrespective of political disagreements.<sup>37</sup>

Buttressing these perspectives, empirical studies on the durability of Sino-Japanese economic ties despite intermittent political frictions deliver critical insights. Utilizing sophisticated gravity models, Shiro Armstrong found negligible impact on bilateral trade currents from tensions between 1986 and 2006.<sup>38</sup> Corroborating this resilience, raw trade data indicates an upward trajectory in volumes between Japan and China throughout Koizumi's tenure from 2001 to 2006 (as depicted in Figure 3.1), mirroring the broader escalation in political dissonance. This finding holds even when comparing growth rates for Japan's total trade and its trade with China. As Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 illustrate, the growth rate for Japan's trade with China consistently outpaced that of its total trade throughout the Koizumi administration. Figure 3.4 provides additional support, demonstrating an increase in exports across all key sectors of Japan's trade with China from 2001 to 2006. Similarly, the annual growth rate of Japan's direct investment in China consistently surpassed that of Japan's total outward foreign direct investment (Table 3.3).

*Table 3.1 Japan's trade with China during the Koizumi administration (2001–2006)*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Exports</i> |                                           | <i>Imports</i> |                                           | <i>Total</i>  |                                         |
|-------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------|
|             | <i>Amount</i>  | <i>Share of Japan's total exports (%)</i> | <i>Amount</i>  | <i>Share of Japan's total imports (%)</i> | <i>Amount</i> | <i>Share of Japan's total trade (%)</i> |
| 2001        | 37637          | 7.7                                       | 70267          | 16.6                                      | 107904        | 11.8                                    |
| 2002        | 49798          | 9.6                                       | 77278          | 18.3                                      | 127076        | 13.5                                    |
| 2003        | 66355          | 12.2                                      | 87311          | 19.7                                      | 153666        | 15.5                                    |
| 2004        | 79942          | 13.1                                      | 101990         | 20.7                                      | 181932        | 16.5                                    |
| 2005        | 88369          | 13.5                                      | 119754         | 21                                        | 208123        | 17                                      |
| 2006        | 107937         | 14.3                                      | 137844         | 20.5                                      | 245781        | 17.2                                    |

However, an economic shadow was cast by Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, especially evident in the high-speed railway project negotiations between Beijing and Shanghai. This situation did catalyze a surge in hard lobbying by some sectors of the business community.

Yet, Koizumi's policies largely remained insulated from commercial pressures due to the lack of a united lobbying front. Notable figures, such as Kitashiro of Doyukai, did raise concerns, but they represented a minority. The crucial role of a unified effort in achieving effective collective action was evident. Within Doyukai, a unanimous stance against Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni was missing. Keidanren's intervention was notably reserved for when China's President Hu Jintao overtly linked Koizumi's actions to the Chinese Shinkansen railway project negotiations.<sup>39</sup> In a nutshell, without unified efforts, interest groups could not achieve the collective action required for hard lobbying or policy reversal.

A discernible reluctance among many Japanese business leaders to go public with their stance on Koizumi's policy was evident. The overarching sentiment was to avoid appearing as yielding to Chinese pressure. This sentiment was magnified by Koizumi's portrayal of the Chinese stance as an intrusion into Japan's sovereign matters. As illuminated by Tables 3.4 and 3.5, mainstream Japanese opinion did not view China's position on the Yasukuni issue as merited. Public sentiment remained largely unswayed in favor of a recalibration of Japan's China policy during Koizumi's tenure, even with growing interpersonal interactions between the two nations.

*Table 3.2 Japan's trade growth rate during the Koizumi administration (2001–2006)*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Total trade growth rate</i> | <i>Trade with China growth rate</i> |
|-------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2001        | -6.7                           | 5.5                                 |
| 2002        | 1.7                            | 16.1                                |
| 2003        | 6.4                            | 31.1                                |
| 2004        | 9.4                            | 25.7                                |
| 2005        | 3.0                            | 9.9                                 |
| 2006        | 3.8                            | 12.4                                |

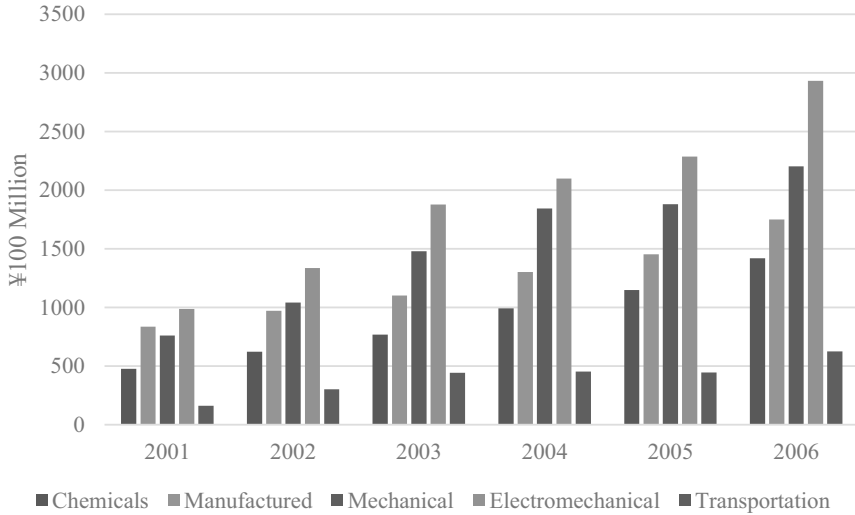


Figure 3.4 Japan's exports to China by important sectors, 2001–2006.

Table 3.3 Japan's outward foreign direct investment flow (2001–2006)

| Year | World                   |                                     | FDI in China            |                                     |                                  |
|------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|      | Value<br>(US\$ billion) | Investment value<br>growth rate (%) | Value<br>(US\$ billion) | Investment value<br>growth rate (%) | Share of<br>Japan's<br>total FDI |
| 2001 | 38495.11                | 18.1                                | 4.35                    | 49.0                                | 11.34                            |
| 2002 | 32039.04                | -20.2                               | 4.19                    | -3.7                                | 12.98                            |
| 2003 | 28767.08                | -11.4                               | 5.05                    | 20.5                                | 17.55                            |
| 2004 | 30961.68                | 7.1                                 | 5.46                    | 7.9                                 | 17.62                            |
| 2005 | 45460.61                | 31.9                                | 6.53                    | 19.8                                | 14.26                            |
| 2006 | 50164.52                | 9.4                                 | 4.6                     | -27.1                               | 9.15                             |

Table 3.4 Opinion poll data: do you support the prime minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine?

| Date       | Source           | Support (%) | Oppose (%) |
|------------|------------------|-------------|------------|
| 2001.8.4   | Asahi Shimbun    | 26          | 65         |
| 2004.11.30 | Asahi Shimbun    | 38          | 39         |
| 2005.4.25  | Asahi Shimbun    | 36          | 48         |
| 2005.6.21  | Mainichi Shimbun | 41          | 50         |
| 2005.7.19  | Yomiuri Shimbun  | 39          | 51         |
| 2005.10.19 | Asahi Shimbun    | 42          | 41         |
| 2005.11.4  | Mainichi Shimbun | 50          | 46         |
| 2006.4.25  | Yomiuri Shimbun  | 54          | 40         |
| 2006.8.7   | Yomiuri Shimbun  | 53          | 39         |

*Table 3.5* Opinion poll data: do you agree that the Chinese demand regarding the Yasukuni issue is justified?

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Source</i>           | <i>Agree (%)</i> | <i>Disagree (%)</i> |
|-------------|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 2001.8.20   | <i>Mainichi Shimbun</i> | 45               | 49                  |
| 2004.11.30  | <i>Asahi Shimbun</i>    | 30               | 57                  |
| 2005.4.25   | <i>Asahi Shimbun</i>    | 19               | 71                  |
| 2005.10.19  | <i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>  | 35               | 53                  |
| 2006.8.7    | <i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>  | 33               | 57                  |

Given the anticipated limited economic repercussions from the tensions, the momentum for a united lobbying initiative receded. This was compounded by:

1. Varied risk appetites, inhibiting consensus within conglomerates like Keidanren and Doyukai.
2. Concerns about appearing obsequious to China, especially with Koizumi's portrayal of demands as intrusive.
3. A static domestic opinion, offering limited push for policy recalibration toward China.

In essence, insulated from immediate losses, Japanese commercial interests determined that the hazards of assertive lobbying outweighed potential rewards. The fragmented landscape compounded collective action challenges, with only minority factions amenable to confronting the administration's stance. This aligns tightly with the scope conditions and causal mechanisms articulated in the theoretical framework.

## Conclusion

This study elucidates that the transmutation of economic interdependence into political influence is neither axiomatic nor linearly constituted. An examination of the Japanese case reveals that despite intensifying current flows of trade and investment, such material linkages may be inadequate impetus to mobilize influential domestic cohorts to remonstrate forcefully against policies inimical to relations with an economically preponderant partner.

The analytical framework delineated in this research critically examines prevailing assumptions about economic statecraft. By categorizing the Hirschmanesque effect into distinct lobbying behaviors and delineating their specific emergent conditions, the study reveals the complex, contingent pathways through which economic dynamics shape political outcomes. This perspective productively complicates economic determinism and underscores the limitations of viewing interdependence as an overriding driver of policy accommodation.

The empirical findings further validate this theoretical contribution, proffering pivotal insights. The resilience of Japanese commercial interests despite political provocations demonstrates that while economic considerations are important, perceived vulnerabilities and strategic cost-benefit calculations can outweigh baseline interdependence. Moreover, the fragmented lobbying landscape among Japanese entities reveals that cohesive, coordinated mobilization is essential for economic imperatives to effectively shape political lobbying or policy shifts.

In essence, this analysis unveils that economic interdependence constitutes just one facet of a multidimensional matrix that interest groups evaluate when determining whether to expend political capital to reshape foreign policy orientations. Domestic complexities, audience costs, and strategic considerations hold equally salient influence.

The integrated theoretical framework and empirics herein engender a more sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which economic ties may or may not affect policy. By scrutinizing a “negative case,” the study delivers pivotal nuance, intimating that the potential to convert economic heft into political leverage globally is likely more contingent and variable than frequently presumed.

While material linkages can promote general predilections for stable ties, substantial political influence likely requires additional triggers like anticipated trade disruption, unified societal lobbying, and receptive leadership. This study’s theoretical framework and empirical analysis elucidating the contingent nature of economic influence sets a strong foundation for an exciting research agenda moving forward. Comparative analysis represents one potentially fruitful avenue to further refine the scope conditions and causal mechanisms identified. Examining a range of cases where economic ties did or did not translate into political accommodation could shed light on additional variables at play. What domestic, ideological, or strategic factors might further enable or constrain the activation of Hirschmanesque effects? Are certain regime types, government structures, or public opinion climates more conducive?

In a similar vein, applying the disaggregated lobbying behavior framework to diverse cases could reveal more about the precise conditions prompting soft versus hard lobbying versus outright policy reversal. It may be that hard lobbying appears more in democracies whereas reversal is likelier in authoritarian states. Testing the model against both positive and negative cases will be pivotal (Figure 3.5).

In conclusion, building upon the foundation laid by Fung et al. (2023) and offering a more detailed typology of intermediary behaviors, introducing the concept of perceived vulnerability, and providing a historical case study, this chapter advances our theoretical understanding of how economic ties translate into political influence. This refined approach not only helps explain the Koizumi-era dynamics but also offers a robust analytical tool for examining contemporary and future cases of economic statecraft and influence attempts by rising powers.



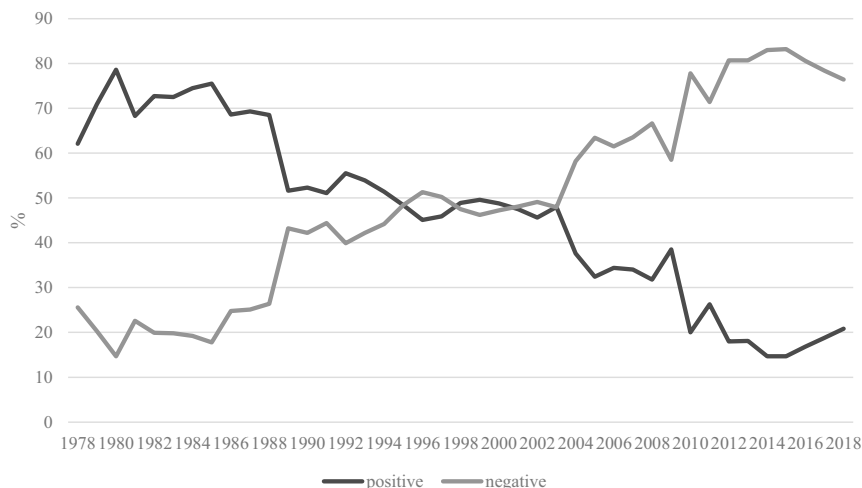


Figure 3.5 Japanese views of China.

## Notes

- 1 Gustavo A. Flores-Macías and Sarah E. Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade: China's Commercial Relations with Africa and Latin America, 1992–2006," *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 75, No. 2 (2013), pp. 353–371; Georg Strüver, "What Friends are Made of: Bilateral Linkages and Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy Alignment with China," *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2016), pp. 170–191. Scott Kastner, however, finds that the validity of such claims is unambiguous only when it comes to economic issues. See Scott L. Kastner, "Buying Influence? Assessing the Political Effects of China's International Trade," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 60, No. 6 (2016), pp. 980–1007.
- 2 Scott Kastner and Margaret Pearson lay out four causal mechanisms that we should pay heed to. First, China can use coercive economic statecraft or inducements to increase Beijing's bargaining power vis-à-vis the target state. Second, economic ties can be utilized to cultivate positive public and elite opinion about China. Third, China's expansive global economic links can lead to growing structural power. Fourth, commerce ties with China can empower powerful interest groups within other countries to constrain the ability of the state to act autonomously. See Scott L. Kastner and Margaret M. Pearson, "Exploring the Parameters of China's Economic Influence," *Studies in Comparative International Development* Vol. 56, No. 1 (2021), pp. 24–30.
- 3 This term was coined by Jonathan Kirshner as he discusses and refers to the seminal work by Albert Hirschman. See Rawi Abdelal and Jonathan Kirshner, "Strategy, Economic Relations, and the Definition of National Interests," *Security Studies* Vol. 9, No. 1–2 (1999), pp. 119–156; Jonathan Kirshner, "The Consequences of China's Economic Rise for Sino-U.S. Relations: Rivalry, Political Conflict, and (Not) War," in Feng Zhu and Rober S. Ross, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 238–259; Albert O. Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945).
- 4 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

- 5 James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, "The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research," *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 98, No. 4 (2004), pp. 657–622. Koizumi's Yasukuni visits are a "negative case" because it is entirely possible that Japan's commercial dependence on China could stop Koizumi from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine as not every Japanese Prime Minister chose to visit the Yasukuni Shrine. By contrast, it will not be a study on a negative case if we were to examine why commerce does not stop Japanese Prime Ministers from claiming Senkaku Islands are part of Japan's territory. In the words of James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, it does not satisfy the "possibility principle."
- 6 Courtney J. Fung, Enze Han, Kai Quek, and Austin Strange, "Conditioning China's Influence: Intentionality, Intermediaries, and Institutions," *Journal of Contemporary China* Vol. 32, No. 139 (2023), pp. 1–6.
- 7 Strüver, "What Friends are Made of: Bilateral Linkages and Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy Alignment with China," pp. 170–191.
- 8 Kastner, "Buying Influence? Assessing the Political Effects of China's International Trade," pp. 980–1007.
- 9 Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*; Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
- 10 Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State*.
- 11 David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- 12 Neil R. Richardson, *Foreign Policy and Economic Dependence* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 64.
- 13 Adam Segal, "Chinese Economic Statecraft and the Political Economy of Asian Security," in William W. Keller and Thomas G. Rawski, eds., *China's Rise and the Balance of Influence in East Asia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2007), p. 149; Kastner and Pearson, "Exploring the Parameters of China's Economic Influence," p. 28.
- 14 Fung, Han, Quek, and Strange, "Conditioning China's Influence."
- 15 Kirshner, "The Consequences of China's Economic Rise for Sino-U.S. Relations: Rivalry, Political Conflict, and (Not) War," pp. 238–259.
- 16 Christina L. Davis and Sophie Meunier, "Business as Usual? Economic Responses to Political Tensions," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 55, No. 3 (2011), pp. 628–646; Xiaojun Li and Adam Y. Liu, "Business as Usual? Economic Responses to Political Tensions between China and Japan," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017), pp. 213–236.
- 17 Yoshihide Soeya, "Japan's Relations with China," in Erza F. Vogel, Ming Yuan, and Takahara Akio, eds., *The Golden Age of the U.S.-China-Japan Triangle, 1972–1989* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 210–212.
- 18 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/boao0204/speech.html>
- 19 Ming Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 225.
- 20 Evan S. Medeiros, Keith Crane, Eric Heginbotham, Norman D. Levin, Julia F. Lowell, Angel Rabasa, and Somi Seong, *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2008).
- 21 Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation*, pp. 237–239.
- 22 <http://www.keidanren.or.jp/english/policy/2003/045/part1.html#s1>; <http://www.keidanren.or.jp/english/policy/2005/002.html>
- 23 Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, "Japan's Economic Diplomacy Towards China: The Lure of Business and the Burden of History," *Clingendael Diplomacy Papers* Vol. 14 (2007), pp. 27–28.

- 24 In fact, the Keidanren has served as a bridge between Chinese and Japanese governments for communication regarding important issues multiple times. In mid-July 1985, Inayama Yoshihiro, president of the Keidanren, who had good relations with Chinese leaders, was sent by Nakasone to consult with Beijing over its attitude concerning the Yasukuni issue.
- 25 <https://www.j-cast.com/2005/12/01000310.html?p=all>
- 26 *Japan Times*, May 18, 2006.
- 27 Mitarai Fujio, “日本経済イノベート計画： 卑怯な経営者は去れ,” *Bungei Shunju* August (2006), pp. 102–103.
- 28 [https://www.doyukai.or.jp/policyproposals/articles/2002/pdf/030418\\_2.pdf](https://www.doyukai.or.jp/policyproposals/articles/2002/pdf/030418_2.pdf)
- 29 The validity of this claim is ambiguous at best, but assuming that this claim is true, Kitashiro was the only one who dared to say it out loud in public.
- 30 *Financial Times*, November 25, 2004.
- 31 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 25, 2004.
- 32 <https://www.doyukai.or.jp/policyproposals/articles/2006/060509a.html>
- 33 Rumi Aoyama and Ryosei Kokubun, “Sino-Japanese Relations: Dynamics of Interdependence and Frictions,” in Yunling Zhang, ed., *Making New Partnership: A Rising China and Its Neighbors* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2007), pp. 69–70.
- 34 *People's Daily*, September 6, 2003.
- 35 Davis and Meunier, “Business as Usual? Economic Responses to Political Tensions,” pp. 628–646.
- 36 *People's Daily*, April 4, 2002.
- 37 Reinhard Drifte, “The Future of the Japanese–Chinese Relationship: The Case for a Grand Political Bargain,” *Asia-Pacific Review* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2009), pp. 56–57.
- 38 Shiro P. Armstrong, “The Politics of Japan–China Trade and the Role of the World Trade System,” *The World Economy* Vol. 35, No. 9 (2012), pp. 1102–1120.
- 39 Yinan He, “Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry? Commerce, Realpolitik, and War Memory in Contemporary Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Asian Security* Vol. 4, No. 2 (2008), p. 166.

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*Appendix*

Japan's export to China by sector, 1988–2006 (Unit: ¥100 million)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Food</i> | <i>Raw Material</i> | <i>Mineral Fuel</i> | <i>Chemicals</i> | <i>Manufactured</i> | <i>Mechanical</i> | <i>Electromechanical</i> | <i>Transportation</i> | <i>Others</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1988        | 3.2         | 34.4                | 1.2                 | 120.6            | 429.1               | 225               | 276.1                    | 67.2                  | 57.1          | 1213.9       |
| 1989        | 3.4         | 25.8                | 3.7                 | 108.2            | 441.8               | 217.5             | 254.7                    | 50.3                  | 59.3          | 1164.7       |
| 1990        | 3.7         | 30                  | 9.7                 | 108.8            | 277.3               | 148.7             | 200.6                    | 44.9                  | 59.9          | 883.5        |
| 1991        | 3.7         | 36                  | 11.5                | 144.3            | 358.4               | 201.6             | 256.6                    | 73.7                  | 70.8          | 1156.8       |
| 1992        | 4.1         | 44.1                | 25.2                | 136.2            | 395.9               | 361.1             | 305.6                    | 146.3                 | 91.8          | 1510.3       |
| 1993        | 3.3         | 41.4                | 39.9                | 117.1            | 534.2               | 507.6             | 346                      | 218.7                 | 103           | 1911.3       |
| 1994        | 5.5         | 47.7                | 34                  | 139.1            | 472.3               | 477.9             | 418                      | 205.6                 | 113.7         | 1913.7       |
| 1995        | 8.8         | 58.2                | 27.9                | 192.1            | 522.5               | 572.6             | 452                      | 87.3                  | 140.4         | 2062         |
| 1996        | 13          | 74.5                | 41.5                | 222.4            | 564.2               | 695.7             | 503.2                    | 99                    | 168.8         | 2382.4       |
| 1997        | 13.3        | 81.2                | 83.1                | 267.1            | 638.3               | 633.2             | 586.7                    | 130.2                 | 197.5         | 2630.7       |
| 1998        | 12.3        | 82.9                | 31.8                | 301.5            | 630.8               | 616.4             | 617.2                    | 115.1                 | 213           | 2620.9       |
| 1999        | 11.4        | 71.8                | 23.6                | 341.8            | 645                 | 563.3             | 677.2                    | 90.6                  | 232.8         | 2657.4       |
| 2000        | 15          | 86.6                | 23.2                | 429.9            | 750.5               | 639.7             | 899                      | 127                   | 303.5         | 3274.4       |
| 2001        | 19.9        | 128.7               | 28.7                | 476.1            | 835.4               | 761.5             | 987.9                    | 160.8                 | 364.8         | 3763.7       |
| 2002        | 20.4        | 145.8               | 38.5                | 621.7            | 970.3               | 1041.4            | 1334.9                   | 301.2                 | 505.5         | 4979.8       |
| 2003        | 22.1        | 174.1               | 45.7                | 767.8            | 1101                | 1477.8            | 1876.9                   | 443.9                 | 726.2         | 6635.5       |
| 2004        | 31.9        | 219.3               | 66.8                | 991.5            | 1301.1              | 1844.3            | 2099.6                   | 453.4                 | 986.4         | 7994.2       |
| 2005        | 39.2        | 297.5               | 135.4               | 1149             | 1453.8              | 1879.4            | 2286.7                   | 446.1                 | 1149.7        | 8836.9       |
| 2006        | 49.4        | 374.3               | 160.2               | 1418.9           | 1749.9              | 2201.6            | 2932.6                   | 624.3                 | 1282.5        | 10793.7      |

## 4 Hydro-Hegemony and Chinese Influence

*Selina Ho*

### Hydro-Hegemony and Chinese Influence

China is the hydro-hegemon of Asia. Its preponderant power, upstream position on the most important rivers in Asia, and technological and infrastructure capability confer it significant advantages over the smaller and weaker neighbors it shares rivers with. Despite its enormous control and leverage over the water resources that flow through Asia, the literature on China's rise either disregards this critical aspect of Chinese power or narrowly focuses on the impact of Chinese dam construction. China's power and influence as the "upstream superpower"<sup>1</sup> need to be explored in a systematic manner. Its actions have consequences that are far-reaching and beyond the negative ecological effects of dam-building and water diversion projects. At the political, strategic, economic, and societal levels, China's position as the hydro-hegemon of Asia impacts how power is configured in the region. The effects of China's hydro-hegemonic position are beyond the water disputes themselves and are intertwined with the broader relations between China and the other riparian states. This chapter assesses Chinese power and influence as the hydro-hegemon of Asia. How does China exercise its hydro-hegemonic power and how effective has China been in translating its power into influence?

Power and influence are not synonymous. China may have grown more powerful in recent decades, but power does not automatically translate into influence.<sup>2</sup> Power is defined as both the material and ideational resources that a state possesses, while influence is the ability of A to shape B's interests, actions, and discourses in accordance with A's preferences.<sup>3</sup> In other words, influence is the outcome when power is exercised or effectively used.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, we measure influence by examining the extent to which target countries of Chinese hydro-hegemonic power accommodate Chinese interest and preferences.<sup>5</sup>

Of the three areas (intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions) that condition China's influence that the editors of this volume identified in the introduction, this chapter focuses on intentionality. It demonstrates that Chinese power and influence can be intentional/non-intentional and direct/indirect. I propose a framework (Figure 4.1) that compares three specific aspects of Chinese power in the river basin: institutional, coercive, and structural. These powers work through three mechanisms of influence: inducement (institutional/bargaining power); use or threat of force (coercive power); and persuasion (structural power and institutional/

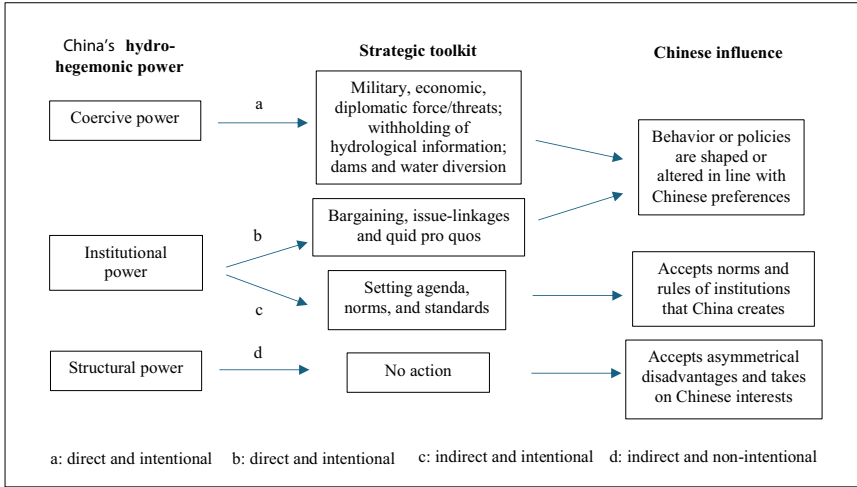


Figure 4.1 Framework for assessing China's hydro-hegemonic influence.

agenda-setting power).<sup>6</sup> Coercive power is direct and intentional, while institutional power is intentional but can be either direct (bargaining) or indirect (agenda-setting). Structural power is both non-intentional and indirect. Influence is measured by three outcomes which illustrate the extent to which Chinese preferences have been accommodated: 1. whether a target state's behavior is shaped or altered in line with Chinese preferences; 2. a target state accepts norms or rules of institutions that China creates; and 3. a target state accepts its asymmetrical disadvantages vis-à-vis China and takes into account Chinese preferences and interest when making decisions.

As the framework I present in this chapter to assess China's hydro-hegemonic influence is exploratory, I have adopted a case study approach—"case studies enjoy a natural advantage in research of an exploratory nature."<sup>7</sup> The first case study examines China's institutional power by examining how China uses issue-linkage, specifically for cooperation on water issues, to bargain with Kazakhstan and to induce Kazakhstan to cooperate on issues that are core to China's national security, strategic, and economic interests. The second case study focuses on China's water disputes with India. China rarely uses coercion on its riparian neighbors, but it did so in two episodes related to India: the withholding of hydrological data during the 2017 Doklam Crisis and the blocking of the Galwan River during the 2020 border clashes with India. The third case study examines China's agenda-setting and structural influence in the Mekong River Basin. Agenda-setting refers to China's use of institutional power to create the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) to set the agenda of interactions between states, establish norms and standards, and limit the scope of discussion. As opposed to institutional and coercive power which are material power, structural power is non-material and non-intentional. It refers to the structures that endow China and the other riparian states with unequal power.

Weaker states accept their subordinate position and asymmetrical disadvantages vis-à-vis China and align with Chinese preferences without any coercion from China. Influence thus results without any intentional involvement by Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

These case studies indicate that China is able to utilize issue-linkages and *quid pro quos* to induce Kazakhstan to align its Uighur, energy, and foreign policy with Chinese preferences. These policies come at substantial cost to Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Its Uighur policies are dictated by Chinese national security concerns. It also opened up its strategic energy sector to Chinese companies. In the case of the Mekong region, there is evidence that China's ability to persuade through agenda-setting is growing while its structural influence is already significant. China's use of coercion in its water disputes with India was, however, unsuccessful in altering Indian behavior.

This chapter is organized in the following manner. I first examine the gaps in the existing literature on China's transboundary river disputes. I then conceptualize the framework for assessing how China translates its hydro-hegemonic power position into influence, which is then applied to the three case studies.

### **Existing Literature on China's Role in Transboundary River Disputes**

Studies on China's water disputes tend to narrowly focus on China's hydropower development in the Mekong region. These studies have focused primarily on the Mekong region and the negative social and environmental effects of its dam construction in the region.<sup>9</sup> While some studies have sought to examine China's role in the Mekong from security and institutional perspectives,<sup>10</sup> these are single case studies that do not facilitate generalization on how China wields its power as an upper riparian across the river basins it shares. The few studies that sought to compare Chinese behavior across disputed transboundary river basins have focused on one specific aspect of behavior, such as desecuritization and cooperation,<sup>11</sup> but they do not offer a holistic comparison of how China exercises its hydro-hegemonic power, the strategies it uses, and the degree of influence it wields. This chapter proposes a framework to assess these important questions across three of China's transboundary river basins.

As the strategic rivalry between China and the United States intensifies, there is a tendency to emphasize China's coercive power over other forms of power. This is certainly the case for studies focusing on the South China Sea dispute, public diplomacy, and China's influence operations. Specifically, on water disputes, there are worries that Chinese coercive power displayed in the South China Sea would extend to the Mekong region—"some security analysts see China's dam construction on the Mekong as the 'second front' added to Beijing's militarization of the islands in the South China Sea..." and China's "damming of the Mekong and gaining undue leverage over downstream countries is analogous and connected to its ongoing construction and weaponization of artificial islands in the South China Sea."<sup>12</sup> These perceptions that China is relying primarily on coercion in its transboundary river disputes need to be re-examined. As this chapter shows, China's preference at least till now, is not to coerce other riparian states. While coercion



does exist in China's toolkit, China's preferred mode of influence is non-coercive and "preference multiplying," which is to utilize the alignment of preferences between China and the smaller states to achieve desired outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Across the case studies in this chapter, China uses a variety of strategies that reflect the range of its power to gain compliance and influence. This chapter assesses how China wields both its material and ideational power at the transboundary river basin level to achieve desired outcomes.

There is an assumption in the existing literature on hydro-hegemony that a hydro-hegemon is always able to ensure positive outcomes for itself.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that hydro-hegemons can translate their power into influence and get others to act according to their preferences. This hypothesis needs further exploration as various incidents have shown that this is not entirely true. For example, the Myitsone dam, which was being constructed by a consortium of Chinese and Myanmar companies, was suspended in 2011 following widespread public protests. Thailand also rejected China's request to blast the rocks and dredge the portion of the Mekong near Chiang Rai province to facilitate cargo vessels coming down from Kunming. The hydro-hegemony literature pays little attention to the agency of smaller states and the influence they can have on hydro-hegemons. A hydro-hegemon's power is not absolute. Influence is relational—the receptivity of the target state determines the level of Chinese influence.<sup>15</sup> This chapter seeks to demonstrate that there are limits to Chinese power, particularly its use of coercive power.

### **Assessing China's Influence as Asia's Hydro-Hegemon**

To assess whether China is able to translate its power position as Asia's hydro-hegemon into actual influence, I propose a framework (Figure 4.1) that takes into account: 1. the material and ideational facets of Chinese power; 2. how China operationalizes its power and the primary toolkit it employs at the river basin level; and 3. measurements of Chinese influence.

Hydro-hegemony is "hegemony at the river basin level, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration, and containment."<sup>16</sup> It is rooted in realist conceptions of hegemony, such as the hegemonic stability theory which predicts that the international system is likely to remain stable when there is one dominant power or hegemon that provides public goods for other states. This suggests that the leadership a hegemon provides is not always negative but can lead to positive contributions to world order. At the river basin level, positive leadership by the hydro-hegemon could mean greater cooperation to resolve water disputes through river-sharing strategies, and regulation and management of shared water resources. Negative leadership by contrast leads to more conflicts and even wars. In reality, hydro-hegemons typically produce both types of leadership. The effects of hydro-hegemonic behavior therefore lie on a spectrum between cooperation and conflict at the river basin level.

In the hydro-hegemony framework that Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner developed for analyzing water conflicts, a hydro-hegemon is identified based on its preponderance of power resources, riparian position (upstream), and resource

exploitation potential (infrastructure and technological capability).<sup>17</sup> Based on these three criteria, China is clearly the hydro-hegemon of Asia. China has preponderant power in the region. There is substantial power asymmetry between China and its riparian neighbors, militarily, economically, and demographically. This power asymmetry is reinforced by its position as the upstream riparian. With less than 1 percent of its water flowing in from other countries and outflows of more than 40 times its inflows,<sup>18</sup> China can choose to ignore the concerns of its downstream neighbors. In addition, China also has the infrastructure and technological capability to exploit water resources. It has a well-developed domestic dam industry that has exported dam-building technology outside of China. China's hydropower expansion has proceeded at an astonishing pace; from having no international hydropower projects prior to 2000, Chinese hydro firms were reported to be engaged in more than 304 large dam projects worldwide as of 2014.<sup>19</sup> Sinohydro, a state-owned enterprise, is the largest hydropower developer in the world, laying claim to more than 50 percent of the global hydropower market.<sup>20</sup>

Zeitoun and Warner focus on three types of power in their framework: coercive power, institutional power, and power over ideas.<sup>21</sup> Coercive power is the Dahlian definition of power, that is, the ability of A to make B do what B would otherwise not do.<sup>22</sup> Institutional power is related to the rules of the game, that is, the institutions and processes that circumscribe the interactions of others. It also examines the bargaining between states that leads to cooperation between them. Power over ideas primarily refers to Susan Strange's knowledge construction—the power to control the channels by which beliefs, ideas, and technology are communicated.<sup>23</sup> The knowledge-constructing capacity of the hydro-hegemon, according to Zeitoun and Allan, “is a chief determinant of who gets what water when and how.”<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve compliance with its interests and preferences, a hydro-hegemon may engage in three water resource control strategies: resource capture, integration, and containment. The construction of dams best exemplifies a resource capture strategy. Other methods include building dikes, diverting river flows, and drilling deep wells that capture the water resources of one's competitor. Integration involves incentivizing or inducing others to encourage compliance. It involves *quid pro quos*, issue-linkages, and benefit-sharing based on a utilitarian and transactional logic, meaning that in return for compliance, the hydro-hegemon could provide economic and trade incentives, diplomatic recognition, and even security/military protection. The third strategy, containment, contrasts with the unilateral approach of the first strategy. In this strategy, the hydro-hegemon is required to engage with its competitors. The aim is to contain them in an asymmetrical position through the use of treaties and discourse, and by influencing their beliefs. Containment is considered the most efficient compliance strategy as it involves willing compliance or acquiescence on the part of the non-hydro-hegemons.

While Zeitoun and Warner's framework is useful for understanding hydro-hegemonic strategies and the kinds of leadership that hydro-hegemons provide, it suffers from two key weaknesses. First, their framework is rooted in material conceptions of power emphasizing control, specifically water resource control strategies, even though there is an attempt to incorporate ideational power in their

framework. The water resource control strategies reflect material conceptions of power aimed at altering the incentives of others to get others to do what they otherwise would not do. Their framework lacks a fuller exposition on ideational power. The use of indirect and unintentional power—structural power—is under-explored. As Strange has noted, the actor in a stronger social position has “the power to shape and determine the structures of the global political economy within which other states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises and their scientists and other professional people have to operate.”<sup>25</sup> Structural power involves domination by the stronger actor such that the weaker actor accepts its subordinate position without any coercion from the stronger actor.

Second, Zeitoun and Warner were more interested in the kinds of leadership that the hydro-hegemon exercises and the strategies they employ than in measuring influence or how effective the hydro-hegemon is in exercising its power. They assume that “the hydro-hegemon is always able to ensure a positive outcome—at least for itself.”<sup>26</sup> As previously mentioned, this argument needs to be examined more thoroughly given that there are instances where hydro-hegemons are circumscribed by the internal politics of other riparian states.

To more accurately assess China's hydro-hegemonic influence, I propose a framework that measures the outcomes of Chinese power, both material and ideational, at the river basin level (Figure 4.1). I focus on two types of material power: institutional and coercive, and one type of ideational power: structural power. Coercive power is intentional and direct. It involves the actual use of force as well as threats, military force or threats, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation. At the river basin level, the withholding of hydrological data as well as dam construction and water diversion projects are coercive strategies. Institutional power is also intentional but can be either direct or indirect. Direct institutional power involves bargaining and the use of issue-linkages and *quid pro quos*, while indirect institutional power is achieved through setting agendas, norms, and standards. Agenda-setting is “the formal or informal institutions that mediate between A and B, working through the rules and procedures that define these institutions, guides, steers, and constrains the actions (or nonactions) and conditions of existence of others.”<sup>27</sup>

To examine ideational power, I focus on China's structural power. In contrast to the first two types of power, structural power is indirect and non-intentional. Structural power is a type of power that Steven Lukes has described as “insidious.”<sup>28</sup> Barnett and Duvall point out that structures represent a direct constitutive relation, that is structural position A exists only because of its relation to structural position B.<sup>29</sup> A weaker actor in such a structure will self-identify as the weaker party and accept the dominance of the more powerful actor and its own subordinate status. Power can be unintentional in this sense as the pre-existing structural bias affects power in such a manner as to result in unintended consequences.<sup>30</sup> A naturally affects B's decisions even if there is no clear intent on A's part to do so. A can secure compliance from B without having to act or coerce B.

To measure the effectiveness of China's hydro-hegemonic power and the strategies it uses, the framework relies on three yardsticks. First, China is successful in

translating coercion and bargaining into influence when the target state's behavior or policies are shaped or altered according to China's preferences. Second, it is successful in agenda-setting when the target state accepts the norms and rules of institutions that China has created. Third, China's structural influence is manifested when other riparian states accept their asymmetrical position vis-à-vis China in their discourses and act in ways that accommodate Chinese interests at the expense of their own. The case studies in the following sections analyze how effective China has been in translating its institutional, coercive, and structural power into influence.

### **Bargaining with Kazakhstan**

River water flowing from China accounts for the highest proportion of water flowing into Kazakhstan, at approximately 18 percent of the latter's total water availability.<sup>31</sup> Of the 24 rivers that China and Kazakhstan share along their border, the Ili and Irtysh rivers are the largest and most significant. Both rivers are important lifelines for water-starved Kazakhstan. On the Chinese side, the rivers play a critical role in China's plans to boost the economy of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where the rivers begin. Although only 4 percent of the Irtysh River lies in China, its flows from China into Kazakhstan nevertheless constitute the bulk of the Irtysh's flow.<sup>32</sup> About one-third of the Ili River lies in China. Within Kazakhstan, the Ili supports the vital rich fisheries of Lake Balkhash, and the agricultural and industrial sectors.<sup>33</sup> China's water diversion projects on both rivers have been criticized as a major cause of the decline in their flows, and the consequent impact on the agricultural and aquatic microsystems.<sup>34</sup>

Kazakhstan's reliance on water flowing in from China gives China significant leverage over the former. China has extensive security, strategic, and economic interests in Kazakhstan, including securing Kazakhstan's cooperation to contain the Uighur separatist movements in Xinjiang, energy cooperation, getting Kazakh support in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and to balance the United States' and Russia's influence in the region. To garner Kazakhstan's cooperation in these areas, China's main strategy is to rely on issue-linkages and quid pro quos. In return for Kazakhstan's cooperation on the Uighur problem, energy cooperation, and support in SCO and great power politics, China cooperates with Kazakhstan on a variety of water-related issues.

China's level of institutionalized cooperation with Kazakhstan is highest among the countries it shares rivers with.<sup>35</sup> This relatively higher level of institutionalized cooperation with Kazakhstan became more visible from the early 2000s onwards, including the establishment of a joint river commission with Kazakhstan in 2003, agreements on water quality protection and environmental protection, and discussions on water allocation among others. These represent significant concessions on China's part as it has avoided discussing these issues, particularly water sharing, with its other riparian neighbors. In 2008, the joint river commission was brought under the umbrella of the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee,<sup>36</sup> which oversees the strengthening and deepening of overall cooperation between the two

sides, suggesting that the work of the river commission is linked to the entire range of cooperation between China and Kazakhstan.

Among China's security and strategic priorities with respect to Kazakhstan, getting Kazakhstan's cooperation to contain the Uighur separatist problems in Xinjiang is paramount. Kazakhstan's initial efforts to nudge China to begin negotiations on their shared river resources met with little success until the late 1990s. In 1996, the Kazakh government, under Chinese pressure, dissolved Uighur associations and political parties, and closed down the Institute of Uighur Studies within the Institute of Oriental Studies.<sup>37</sup> Both countries also agreed not to assist separatist movements in the other country.<sup>38</sup> Chinese intelligence agencies also entered Kazakh territory with the consent of the Kazakh government to track down Uighur separatists and extradite them back to China.<sup>39</sup> Kazakhstan also closed newspapers and arrested militants, particularly after serious riots in Yining, Xinjiang, which is close to the Kazakh border, in 1997.<sup>40</sup> In return for Kazakhstan's cooperation on these issues, the first round of water talks between the two countries began in May 1999. Five rounds of talks were held and eventually, the Agreement on Cooperation on the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers, which provided for the establishment of a joint river commission, was signed in 2001.

Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan further expanded in the 2000s. China needed Kazakhstan's cooperation on the intensified campaign against Uighur separatists following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. In December 2002, China and Kazakhstan signed a bilateral agreement to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The intelligence cooperation and information exchanges that began in the 1990s were formalized in this agreement. Sino-Kazakh cooperation in the energy sector reached a new high in the 2000s, signified by the opening of the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline, which runs from central Kazakhstan to western China.<sup>41</sup> Chinese oil companies made further inroads into Kazakhstan, operating oil fields and exercising substantial control over key Kazakh oil companies.<sup>42</sup> Kazakhstan's cooperation as a strategic partner in the SCO also increased during this period; Kazakhstan supported China's counter-terrorism initiatives in the SCO and its partnership with China is an important counterweight against Russian and American influence. To reciprocate Kazakhstan's cooperation on these issues critical to China's interest, China cooperates with Kazakhstan on water quality, joint development, and water-allocation negotiations. From the setting up of the joint river commission in 2003 to 2016, fourteen meetings were held, resulting in a number of significant agreements, the most important of which are a water quality protection agreement in 2011 and the beginning of consultations on water sharing in 2015.<sup>43</sup>

The account of events above demonstrates that as the dominant upstream riparian of the rivers that China shares with Kazakhstan, China exercises significant influence in shaping Kazakhstan's security, economic, and foreign policies. Through bargaining, issue-linkages, and *quid pro quos*, China succeeds in inducing cooperation from Kazakhstan on a slew of issues that pertain to China's vital interests. Kazakhstan's Uighur policies are dictated by Chinese concerns; the closing down of Uighur-affiliated schools and the dissolution of Uighur political parties

and associations are in line with Chinese preferences. These moves suggest significant influence over Kazakhstan's domestic affairs. Critically, Chinese intelligence agencies operating in Kazakh territory compromise Kazakhstan's sovereignty. To win Chinese cooperation on water issues, Kazakhstan has also opened its strategic energy sector to Chinese companies.

### **Coercion in the China–India Water Dispute**

Although China has eschewed the use of military and economic coercion in managing its water disputes with its riparian neighbors, there is evidence that it does see coercion as a potential tool to use against its neighbors during times of intense conflict. Two episodes related to India stood out: the withholding of hydrological data from India during the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the blocking of the Galwan River during border clashes with India in 2020.

Of the rivers that China shares with India, the Brahmaputra River is the most significant. The Brahmaputra is intertwined with the border dispute between the two countries as it flows from Tibet and crosses the border into Arunachal Pradesh, which is administered by India but claimed by China as South Tibet. During the Doklam standoff in 2017, China withheld hydrological data on the Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers from India, despite the memorandums of understanding signed between the two countries in which China has agreed to supply hydrological data to India during the flood season.<sup>44</sup> India considers such data critical for reducing the impact of floods on the people living in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In response to Indian revelations that India had not received hydrological data from China during the standoff, the Chinese government avoided linking the data disruption to the Doklam standoff, instead offering a technical explanation that the monitoring stations in Tibet were being renovated. However, Chinese claims rang hollow as Bangladesh, the lowest riparian on the Brahmaputra, continued to receive data from China. Observers believed that such moves by China are in line with its practice of coercive diplomacy, and its “increasing use of non-military tools to advance its agenda in regional conflict... The water data cutoff also fits within a narrower category of tactics in which China has applied subtle (or not-so-subtle) pressure without explicitly connecting that pressure to desired strategic objectives.”<sup>45</sup>

More recently, during and in the aftermath of the border clashes between China and India in the Galwan Valley from May 2020, satellite images revealed that China has constructed a dam to block the flow of the Galwan River, a tributary of the Indus River that originates from Aksai Chin, another disputed territory that is controlled by China and claimed by India.<sup>46</sup> China has not commented on these reports. Such moves by China appear to have confirmed Indian analysts' fears that China would use its upstream riparian position as leverage in their border dispute. These Chinese moves to link border disputes with water issues could be a harbinger of how China intends to use its hydro-hegemonic position to threaten downstream countries during periods of heightened tensions.

Notwithstanding these two episodes, China has thus far demonstrated that it prefers to avoid escalating water conflicts, particularly since it has a clear advantage

as the hydro-hegemon. Coercion can be counterproductive to China's efforts to win over its neighbors. Furthermore, the use of coercion in these two instances had limited efficacy in influencing India's behavior. The withholding of hydrological information had no significant effect on India—it did not change India's preferences and was not a sufficient leverage to compel India to withdraw its troops from Doklam. Neither did the construction of the dam across the Galwan River lead to a change in Indian behavior during the border face-off. Studies have shown that Chinese use of coercion often fails.<sup>47</sup>

By and large, the overall trend of China not using coercion, whether military, diplomatic, or economic, on lower riparians remains largely true, at least for now. It has sought to desecuritize the water disputes it has with its neighbors. Desecuritization is defined as the “moving of issues off the ‘security agenda’ and back into the realm of public political discourse and ‘normal’ political dispute and accommodation.”<sup>48</sup> The aim is to lower tensions with another country and prevent an issue from escalating out of control. China has taken assiduous steps to desecuritize the water dispute with India by reassuring the Indians that the dams it builds on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra are “run-of-the-mill” and would not have any significant impact on water flows entering India.<sup>49</sup> Chinese officials have also repeatedly given reassurances in meetings with Indian officials that they have no plans to divert the water of the Brahmaputra River. These desecuritization efforts are astonishing, considering that most of the issues between China and India, including the Tibet issue and their territorial disputes, have been securitized.

In the Mekong River Basin as well, China has taken steps to desecuritize the dispute. For instance, in the spring of 2010 Mekong river crisis, the Chinese government engaged in desecuritization moves to defuse tensions with the lower riparian states when water levels in the lower Mekong sank dramatically.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, there is no firm evidence to support claims that China's “damming of the Mekong and gaining undue leverage over downstream countries is analogous and connected to its ongoing construction and weaponization of artificial islands in the South China Sea.”<sup>51</sup> While the situation may change in the future, fears that China would militarize the waters of the Mekong, as it had done with the South China Sea, appear to be unfounded thus far. Vietnam's long-standing fears that China would link the Mekong waters with its claims on the South China Sea and threaten to cut off water to downstream countries unless they comply with Chinese demands on the South China Sea have not materialized. Although China's dam constructions in the upper reaches of the Mekong and Brahmaputra rivers are coercive strategies aimed at controlling water resources, they are not attempts to influence the policies and preferences of lower riparian states per se but to serve the purpose of hydro-power development in Yunnan province and Tibet, respectively. Moreover, studies have shown that China's entrenched role in hydropower development in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar is in line with the preferences and goals of governments in these countries, and Chinese influence is not coercive as such but instead, points to the strategy of “preference multiplying.”<sup>52</sup>

### **The Mekong Region: Agenda-Setting and Structural Power**

The Mekong region comprises six riparian states: China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The mainstream and tributaries of the Mekong are critical for the livelihoods of those who live in the Mekong Delta. Water from the China section of the Mekong contributes about 18 percent of the water flow during the rainy season and up to 40 percent during the dry seasons.<sup>53</sup> China currently has 11 dams on the mainstream of the Mekong with several others under construction. Its establishment of the LMC in 2015 gives it the opportunity to set norms and rules, promote ideas and concepts, and enhance its leadership and influence in the region. The LMC has built up its institutional structures significantly, establishing annual foreign ministers' meetings, numerous senior government meetings and training, a secretariat, a Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center based in Beijing, and a Global Center for Mekong Studies linking think tanks across the region.<sup>54</sup> Departing from its usual reticence in discussing sensitive issues in the political, security, and environmental protection realms, cooperation in these areas is included in the LMC's mandate, giving China the platform to engage lower Mekong countries on a range of issues. It views existing mechanisms such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Mekong River Commission (MRC) to be dominated by western and Japanese interests and has been reluctant to engage in these issues with them. China in turn uses the LMC "as a cover to exclude other external players by highlighting identity, selectively setting the agenda and providing regional public goods."<sup>55</sup>

An examination of the impact of China's agenda-setting power exercised through the LMC shows that Chinese influence is set to expand in at least three areas. First, China is using its leadership role to decide which issues should be prioritized and which can be dealt with at a later date.<sup>56</sup> The Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation has organized a number of activities to improve communication, capacity-building, and interaction with the lower Mekong countries.<sup>57</sup> These activities and forums enable China to control the agenda and set standards in water cooperation on its own terms, reflecting its preferences as opposed to those set by the MRC. Observers are concerned that Chinese influence in this area would entrench the low environmental governance standards that are pervasive in the region; Pichamon Yeophantong has illustrated how Chinese influence from infrastructure projects in Myanmar and Cambodia has amplified and reinforced the lax environmental policies in the two countries.<sup>58</sup> Apart from environmental standards, China is also setting technical standards via its technological and infrastructure capability. The numerous projects in the Mekong Region that come under the Belt and Road Initiative give China the opportunity to set technical standards in the construction of dams, roads, and railways. Furthermore, putting security (limited to non-traditional security threats) on the table sets the LMC apart from the GMS and MRC. This suggests that China is generating a new conversation on security in the region, perhaps to reflect its ideas on collective security encapsulated in its Global Security Initiative. China has also introduced the concept of a "Lancang-Mekong Community of Common Destiny" at the first Senior Officials' Meeting of



the LMC in 2015.<sup>59</sup> Three of the Mekong states, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, have signed on to the concept. The concept weaves the region into a Sino-centric world order with its own norms, rules, and culture. Although China portrays the concept as inclusive of different political systems and cultures, it has the effect of excluding other major powers from the region.

Second, China's state-centric and national-to-national government approach may lead to the sidelining of subnational actors and civil society in the management of the Mekong. While China has sponsored people-to-people exchanges and scholarship programs under the LMC, there is very little effort to engage NGOs, civil society, and the public in deliberations of its policy directions.<sup>60</sup> Third, China's institution-building efforts in the Mekong are also changing the regional architecture. A Thai academic remarked that "The LMC now looks and feels like the only game in the Mekong town. China won't play by the other rules and frameworks set up in an earlier generation."<sup>61</sup> The MRC is in danger of being eclipsed by the LMC.<sup>62</sup> It has struggled with influencing decision-making in governments and in recent years has not been able to constrain the building of large-scale dams; after Laos moved ahead with construction of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams on the Mekong before the MRC could conclude its regional consultation, the Save the Mekong civil society network boycotted the MRC's consultation on the Pak Lay dam.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from agenda-setting, China's structural power in the Mekong Region is evident. Its social position as the unrivaled hydro-hegemon in the Mekong region gives it pervasive influence in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the region. There is a large power asymmetry between China and the lower Mekong states. Downstream countries, in particular Cambodia and Laos, are reliant on China for economic development. China is the top foreign investor and aid provider in Cambodia and Laos. China invested about \$1 billion annually in Cambodia between 2013 and 2017, and accounted for 44 percent of FDI between 1994 and 2014.<sup>64</sup> In Laos, China accounted for 70 percent of FDI in 2018.<sup>65</sup> Chinese companies are building and financing about six of the eleven dams planned on the mainstream of the Mekong in Laos and Cambodia,<sup>66</sup> and have also played key roles in designing and constructing dams in Vietnam, supplying an estimated 90 percent of the equipment and much of the labor for these projects.<sup>67</sup>

Chinese structural influence is demonstrated in the manner with which lower riparian countries accept their asymmetrical disadvantages relative to China. Structural influence is unintentional, meaning that there is no direct coercion or persuasion by China. It has manifested in two ways in the lower Mekong states: in discourses and when these states take into account Chinese interests at the expense of their own. In discourses, Cambodia and Laos in particular have expressed acceptance of their identity as weaker states and their asymmetrical position vis-à-vis China. There is acknowledgment in Cambodia that its survival is dependent on China. Secretary of State Vongsey Vissoth at the Ministry of Environment and Finance was quoted as saying: "Without China, there would be no Cambodia today—one must learn to accept that."<sup>68</sup> A Lao senior official expressed similar sentiments: "*Laos is lucky it has China* and other big countries, such as Vietnam

and Thailand surrounding it... We ask China to think about Laos and not to turn away from Laos or to divert from Laos to Myanmar and Vietnam. *We ask them not to forget Laos.*"<sup>69</sup> These discourses are not only confined to Cambodia and Laos but also to the relatively stronger states in the Mekong region. According to a Thai scholar, "the Thai military government... is  *beholden* to China on Mekong issues. In addition, Thailand is not as adversely affected as downstream communities in Cambodia and Vietnam, but they *dare not speak up publicly against China.*"<sup>70</sup>

Structural power is also manifested when Mekong countries accommodate Chinese interest and preferences even when China does not act intentionally. Huong Le Thu describes it as a "psychological threat" when "ASEAN leaders increasingly opt for avoiding collective decisions, or even statements about certain topics that are considered as inimical to Beijing's interests" even when China is not present at these meetings.<sup>71</sup> A former Singaporean diplomat, Bilahari Kausikan, similarly describes: "China doesn't just want you to comply with its wishes, it wants you to... do what it wants without being told."<sup>72</sup> The accommodation of Chinese interests has come at the expense of the interests of the lower riparian states. Laos, for instance, is at risk of having its sovereignty compromised because of the large debts it owes China. According to the Lowy Institute, the total debt Laos owed to China stood at approximately 45 percent of Laos's GDP.<sup>73</sup> In order to pay off these debts, Laos would have to trade land and sell commodities such as bauxite and potassium. Chinese dams also have a significant impact on the ecology and livelihoods of local people in the downstream countries; for instance, Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake is dying, and sediment flows and fish migration are disrupted in Vietnam. However, despite the damage inflicted by these dams, the governments of the lower Mekong states have been publicly silent on the environmental impact of Chinese dams. They have avoided securitizing the issue despite the significant impact of these dams on the economic, environmental, human, and food security of the region.<sup>74</sup>

By taking on debt (Laos) and refraining from criticizing China, the lower Mekong states have taken on Chinese interests at the expense of their own in the belief that these trade-offs would allow them to leverage Chinese economic growth for their own development and growth. As Goh has noted, China does not need to change the preferences of these states as their interests are aligned; it only needs to identify common imperatives, initiate action, and commit resources to multiply these preferences.<sup>75</sup> The explanation in this chapter, however, goes further than "preference multiplying"—Chinese structural power has shaped the identity of the lower Mekong states to the extent that they accept their subordinate position in relation to China and cannot imagine an alternative to identifying their interests with China's.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed a framework for analyzing and operationalizing China's material and ideational power that ensues from its hydro-hegemonic position, and how such power translates into influence. The empirical evidence

suggests that China's hydro-hegemonic power does confer it significant influence although its influence depends on which type of power it exercises and the accompanying strategies it uses. China has been largely successful in translating its structural power into influence, that is, the lower Mekong states accept their asymmetrical disadvantages vis-à-vis China and, at times, take on China's interests and preferences. China also has the ability to use issue-linkages and reciprocity to shape the behavior of others and extract concessions. Moreover, as China engages in institutional building and agenda setting, its norms and standards are increasingly accepted. The LMC, for instance, is considered the most active multilateral organization in the Mekong region. China has, however, encountered little success in using coercion to alter the behavior of its target state.

Chinese success in influencing its lower riparian neighbors, however, does not suggest that the smaller states have no agency. Recent research demonstrates that target states' domestic institutions affect China's influence; "in particular, they shape whether and how the behavior of different Chinese actors, as well as reactions and perceptions toward these behaviors by groups and individuals in the host environment, are included in the domestic aggregation of societal preferences within the host country."<sup>76</sup> Host countries' domestic institutions create payoffs that determine whether they are receptive or resistant to Chinese efforts to influence.<sup>77</sup>

It is outside the parameters of this chapter to discuss the agency of the lower riparians, but the incidents of resistance and pushbacks suggest that this will be an area of fruitful research for the future. I conclude with a few observations that point to further research. First, domestic politics and public opinion in host countries play an important role in determining how effective China is in exercising its hydro-hegemonic power. Public opinion has served as a check on the extent to which the semi-authoritarian governments in the region can accede to China's preferences. Under what conditions would public opinion and civil society in target countries be successful in constraining Chinese influence? Second, influence is not a one-way street. China has also been influenced by its neighbors. The willingness of China to include water cooperation in its LMC agenda, in contrast to its earlier reticence, is an indication of the influence China's much smaller neighbors can have on China's water policies. This is because China needs to maintain its reputation and credibility to lead.<sup>78</sup> China's concerns about negative reactions to its activities have prompted changes on its part, creating a feedback loop in China's policy process.<sup>79</sup> This reverse influence—how do China's riparian neighbors influence China, and under what conditions can they do so?—is an interesting question for future exploration.

## Notes

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## 5 Grand Strategy's Domestic Underpinnings

### A Dynamic Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative

*Min Ye*

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marked its tenth anniversary in 2023. Over the past decade, extensive research has been conducted on Beijing's motivations and the BRI's influence on both the global and regional scales.<sup>1</sup> Perspectives on the BRI vary: some regard it as a valuable fix to the "rigged" Western neoliberal order, while others criticize it as an attempt by China to establish a neo-statist order.<sup>2</sup> Research highlights the BRI's development impacts, including improvements in both "hard" and "soft" infrastructure within the economies of the Global South.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, studies point out China's "reputation deficit" in developing countries<sup>4</sup> and sustained suspicion in developed democracies.<sup>5</sup> The BRI has also experienced significant changes, from the Chinese leadership's rhetoric, to policy guidelines, to actual investment patterns. These developments present opportunities to explore China's changing role in the international arena.

As outlined in the introduction of this volume, there are three avenues to studying China's influence: examining influence externalities, Chinese intermediaries, and host institutions. This chapter unpacks the BRI's internal developments and identifies domestic interests, actors, and actions. It offers a dynamic account of multifaceted intermediaries operating between China and the recipients, from BRI 1.0 (2013 to 2018) to BRI 2.0 (2019 to 2023). It reveals that during BRI 1.0, domestic interests linked to infrastructure, machinery making, and heavy industries were prominent in implementing China's BRI policies, which focused on infrastructure-led investment and construction. Subsequently, large BRI projects came across backlash, and the BRI investment and construction declined. However, dubbed as BRI 2.0, this period also saw the rise of new sectors and actors, including the scientific communities and sectors such as public health, the environment, and digital development.

By focusing on Chinese intermediaries, this chapter proposes a dynamic approach to studying the BRI in China. While the overarching purposes and significance have remained consistent, the interests and influence of the BRI's intermediaries are not static, reflecting a mix of internal and external conditions surrounding China. At the BRI's inception, Beijing faced three critical challenges: U.S. encirclement of China in Maritime Asia, diplomatic struggles in China's periphery, and massive industrial overcapacity straining the national economy.<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, the new leadership had just assumed power, creating political uncertainty within the state and state-run businesses. As a result, the BRI took on a life of its own. Beyond

the cultural significance of the Silk Road, it was politically safe and prudent for rank-and-file cadres to show loyalty to the new leadership while advocating for their preferred economic programs. Essentially, the BRI's genesis was unique in that neither the leadership nor the bureaucracy stipulated where it should go and how it should be done. In the absence of top-down regulations, local governments and Chinese businesses capitalized on the BRI to address preexisting priorities, such as credit tightening, overcapacities, and diplomatic tensions.

As China's global strategy in the new era, the BRI's priorities are long-term and adaptive to changing circumstances. Initially, the BRI was heavily influenced by domestic economic actors. However, as China's business and bureaucracy had limited knowledge and networks to expand their global footprint, their rapid globalization efforts faced setbacks and backlash. These external reactions precipitated a new phase for the BRI. After 2019, building on the feedback and lessons from BRI 1.0, the rhetoric and policy guidelines shifted to better articulate goals, explain the mechanisms, and explicitly mitigate risks and fallout. With increased financial oversight and restrictions, there has been a decline in large loans and infrastructure investments. This downward trend accelerated further during the COVID-19 pandemic, as China's ability to invest and recipient governments' ability to borrow both deteriorated.

The chapter has four sections. The first section introduces the dynamic approach to the BRI's internal evolution, focusing on actors within the Chinese state system and economic intermediaries linking China and host countries. The second section examines the impact of BRI 1.0 on mobilizing the multifaceted actors in China to participate more actively and flexibly in outward globalization. The third section discusses the debates from the first BRI Summit in 2017 to the second in 2019, underscoring the challenges BRI 1.0 faced in external implementation and how those challenges were addressed in the leadership's new rhetoric and bureaucratic propositions. The fourth section looks into China's strategic rethinking since the pandemic and the subsequent changes in BRI 2.0. Finally, as China's global strategy, the newly articulated BRI reveals China's foreign economic and diplomatic priorities and planning. Regardless of future scopes, finding the "right position" and "right roles" has been a persistent and essential task for China's BRI and holds important implications for other countries. Referring back to the conceptual framework in this volume, the focus on Chinese intermediaries is likely to illuminate future trends in China's influence projection abroad.

### **Changing Intermediaries in the BRI Process**

In just a few years, the literature on the BRI has expanded to include research collections that explore diverse drivers, domestic and international actors, and external impacts.<sup>7</sup> Notably, Fung et al. (2023) have examined how China's influence is conditioned by three mechanisms: intentionality, intermediaries, and host institutions.<sup>8</sup> Regarding intentions, some scholars emphasize the leadership's ambition to dominate others.<sup>9</sup> Others underscore the BRI's goal of attracting other countries through economic inducement and advantages.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, many argue for

China's commercial interests, driven by state-owned enterprises (SOEs),<sup>11</sup> local governments,<sup>12</sup> and surplus industries.<sup>13</sup>

Departing from the conventional wisdom that treats China as a unitary actor, this volume's conceptualization of intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions underscores multifaceted and complex mechanisms conditioning China's influence and behavior. This framework highlights the autonomy and agency of actors executing BRI projects and policymakers operating in the mixture of internal and external interests and institutions. However, in keeping with the political science tradition, these approaches are somewhat static and view individuals or institutions as fixed units of analysis or factors of causation. This chapter proposes a dynamic approach, highlighting the changing behavior of intermediaries in response to changed internal and external circumstances. The idea is that actors making BRI decisions and participating in BRI projects are adaptable and flexible, with changing knowledge, skills, and experience. Through the BRI's trial and error, these actors change, revise, and evolve, consequently shaping the life cycle and span of the BRI strategy. By focusing on key actors and their evolving ideas and interests over the last ten years, we can identify the trends and changes in the strategy's evolution. The BRI's impact on China can be positive or negative, institutional, developmental, or strategic. More definitive answers emerge through the process and actor-oriented analysis.

Then who are the actors to study? Which processes should we investigate? The BRI is a comprehensive global policy in China; therefore, the dynamic approach focuses on significant players in China's external economic expansion. According to Ye, the state system orchestrating BRI implementation and adaptation comprises three blocks: the political leadership, the bureaucracy, and economic arms, including SOEs and local governments.<sup>14</sup> Personnel in each block bring their interests and ideas, which evolve during the process of BRI implementation. Figure 5.1 synthesizes the relevant actors in the BRI in China, their relative roles and possible evolutions. The first block is the political block, consisting of the political leader and the BRI Leading Small Group. This group formulates the original policy, offers continuous support, and coordinates the strategy within the state system. Most decisive, albeit vague, strategic directions come from this block. For example, the leadership remarks have framed the BRI as "the project of the century" (2017), emphasized sustainable development (2019), and promoted dual circulation (2021).

The second set of players is the policy block. The BRI represents China's global economic expansion, and thus, most industrial agencies, planning bodies, and the premier are involved in formulating BRI policy guidelines. For example, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) jointly studied and launched the BRI Action and Vision Plan in 2015 and a subsequent plan in 2019. These plans coordinated pro-BRI provisions in other agencies and mobilized SOEs and local governments to devise specific projects and programs. The third block comprises the leading implementation actors: SOEs and local governments. In this implementation block, scholars and think tanks play a vital role by

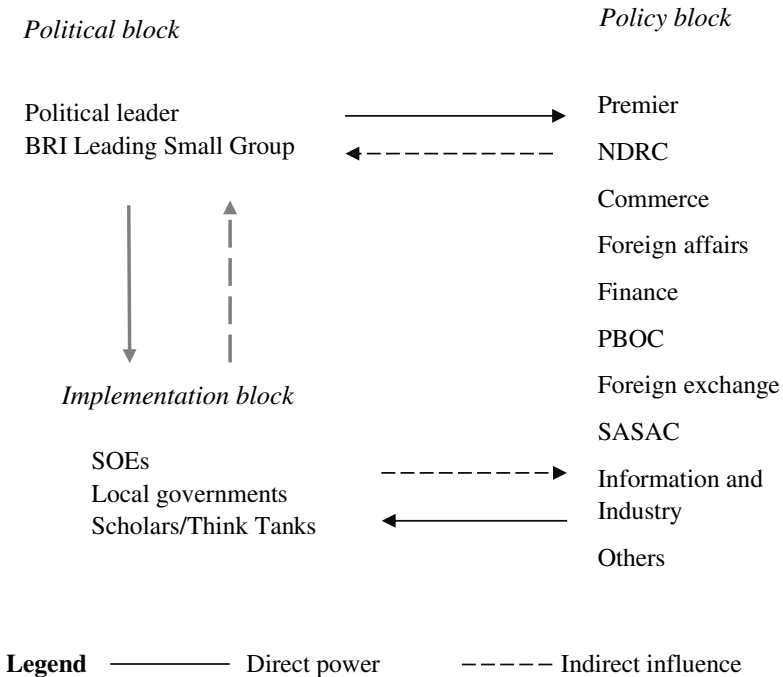


Figure 5.1 BRI's multiple players and evolving preferences.

interpreting political directions and policy guidelines and providing consultancy and advice to SOEs and local governments.

In Figure 5.1, the weight, type, and directions of influence lines are significant. For example, direct power flows from the political to the policy block, and both extend to the implementation block. Indirect influence--such as priorities, opportunities, and constraints--is often conveyed in the other direction, from the implementation block to the political and policy actors. Policy agencies in Beijing are bureaucrats who take orders from the political leader and make policy provisions to be implemented by SOEs and local governments. Paradoxically, their professional and personal stake in the BRI and BRI projects are less significant than those of political and implementation actors. In other words, bureaucrats are concerned with broad functions and governing issues, such as the domestic economy, RMB internationalization, financial stability, and diplomacy. The BRI is part of their broadly defined and often contradictory governing portfolio. As a result, when focusing on the intentionality and intermediaries of the BRI, the political leader and the implementers have a more direct stake and play a crucial role in determining the motivation, mechanisms, and mobilizations.

The BRI's three-block system, rather than a top-down state, does not fully align political objectives, policy needs, and subnational imperatives, leading to

prevalent disjunctions across the blocks. Mobilized by ambitious political rhetoric and unchecked by ambiguous policy guidelines, Chinese economic actors have often rushed to serve personal and commercial interests. This approach to BRI implementation has generated moral hazard and increased financial and diplomatic risks for China. For example, in 2019, many corruption charges were brought against senior bankers, SOE managers, and bureaucrats concerning BRI projects. Meanwhile, BRI implementation produced social, environmental, and financial fallout in the recipient countries, leading to political backlash and reputational costs for Beijing. The policy block, which is less salient in BRI implementation, comprises focal actors who receive and reflect on the negative feedback. Scholars and think tanks play an active role in absorbing external and bureaucratic feedback, writing, and publishing to influence the remaking of BRI policies and the adaptation of BRI implementation.

Figure 5.2 summarizes this dynamic BRI policy cycle and its players in multiple stages and steps. Different motivations, actors, and conditions in which they play leading roles have varied in each stage and step. Specifically, before the BRI's birth, the leadership evaluated the country's structural conditions and announced the BRI strategy. The leadership employed political mobilization to inspire the policy and economic actors to execute the strategy. Then, the policy actors provided guidelines and incentives to stimulate subnational implementations. As explained earlier, top-down mobilization, lacking specific oversight, led to moral hazard in BRI projects abroad. The external backlash and feedback

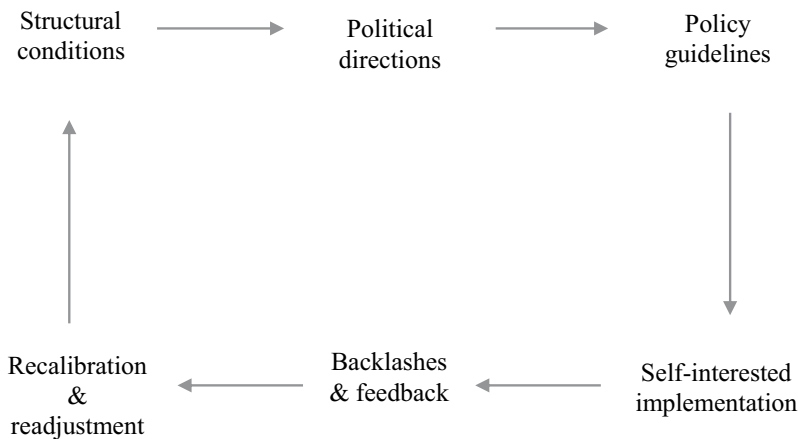


Figure 5.2 A dynamic process.

finally reached the state agencies overseeing the policy guidelines and implementation. They incorporated this feedback and reimposed state control to rein in economic actors.

The calibrated BRI policy starts with modified structural conditions, leading to revised political directions. The process shows different types of policy guidelines through revamped incentive structures. When sustainable development became the new focus of political mobilization, the BRI's new policy guidelines incorporated more green regulations and financing rules. However, once the new BRI enters implementation, the economic actors' priority and economic interests will determine the execution of their project. For example, if a business is not inherently green and cannot feasibly transition to a new economy, it is likely to continue its previous non-green operations, with green technology and sectors as mere add-on businesses. In other words, unless the dominant economic interests of implementers change, top-down guidelines will not fundamentally alter their behavior patterns.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the BRI's dynamic process is recurrent, with players repeating the cycle in multiple rounds until structural conditions stabilize.

How does the dynamic approach to the BRI speak to the analysis of China's influence through intentionality, intermediaries, and host institutions? In the dynamic approach, the BRI is an integral part of China's global strategy under the current leadership, with broad objectives spanning multiple levels. At the highest level, the BRI is China's grand strategy to achieve peaceful development and national rejuvenation, which can be unpacked in two directions: seeking external peace and facilitating domestic development.<sup>16</sup> The BRI's specific priorities and objectives can change from one period to another or from one region to another due to divergent opportunities and constraints. For example, the first phase of the BRI aimed to quickly address domestic overcapacities, enhance periphery diplomacy, and manage geopolitical competition with the U.S. The policy measures and political messages sought to rapidly incentivize enough domestic players to participate and gain enough external acceptance. As a result, ambivalent and oversized financial pledges were announced, local governments were empowered, and Chinese companies were allowed to explore overseas markets and opportunities. The host countries, with their varying financial and institutional capacities, interacted differently with the BRI, resulting in mixed effects. Consequently, the BRI achieved more apparent success in some places, while in others, the achievements were short-lived and characterized by long-term fragility.<sup>17</sup>

Generally, BRI 1.0 faced sustainability challenges due to rampant corruption and high diplomatic costs. It also increased financial risks for the recipient countries and contributed to the formation of anti-China geopolitical coalitions. Consequently, project and investment flows began to decline in 2018. By 2019, policy guidelines and political directions became more modest, underscoring sustainable objectives and activities. COVID-19 marked a significant turning point in the BRI's evolution. It negatively impacted the BRI by disrupting travel, trade, and connectivity. Additionally, it hindered recipient countries' ability to borrow and finance infrastructure due to added financial stresses from the health crisis. China's domestic economy also underwent a substantial transformation, with

health, digitalization, and the green economy gaining prominence at the expense of industrial and infrastructure growth. New sectors, such as health products and electric vehicles, began to expand globally at a rapid pace. These economic shifts have started to alter the BRI's intentions and intermediaries within China. Moreover, the pronounced U.S.–China rivalry has reshaped the geopolitical landscape.

### **BRI 1.0: From Birth to Expansion**

It is tempting to seek clear answers regarding Beijing's intention behind the BRI; however, the reality is more complex. A dynamic approach avoids attributing a singular or dominant intention to the formation of the BRI in China. Instead, the analysis begins with the structural context in which the BRI was conceived. Specifically, when the new leadership came to power in 2012 and before the launch of the BRI in late 2013, significant challenges were observed in China's foreign policy and domestic economy. As documented by Ye, China faced considerable diplomatic challenges with Asian countries, ranging from Kazakhstan and Mongolia to Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> In the military and security realms, China's maritime disputes with Asian countries and the U.S. were intensifying. Domestically, industry overcapacity was severe across China, and an economic recession was imminent. As SOEs and local governments faced pressure to cut production and close plants, large-scale unemployment was expected, putting social stability at risk.

In this structural context, the leadership focused on consolidating power through an anti-corruption campaign within the state and the promotion of socialist values in society. Meanwhile, bureaucracies and their associated think tanks proposed three plans to address the pressing external and internal policy challenges. The first was infrastructure diplomacy, proposed to ease diplomatic frictions by using China's surplus funds and strength in infrastructure to connect China more closely with its regional neighbors, thereby stabilizing diplomatic relations. The second was the China-goes-west rebalancing strategy, proposed by strategists to direct China's strategic efforts toward the Eurasian continent, thus avoiding the escalation of maritime conflicts between mainland China and its maritime rivals. The last plan, most prominent among economic technocrats, was dubbed "China's Marshall Plan." It proposed that China use surplus capital to expand overseas markets for Chinese manufactured goods and infrastructure.

While making sense independently, none of these bureaucratic proposals could overcome state fragmentation or rally sufficient state agencies and economic actors to implement. In this policy impasse, the new leadership announced the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kazakhstan and the Maritime Silk Road in Indonesia. The former had many parallels to the China-goes-west proposal, while the latter was derived from the mutual-connectivity projects pursued by diplomats and foreign affairs experts. Moreover, these two proposals, which together formed the BRI, were consistent with the Chinese Marshall Plan—using investment and loans to expand overseas markets for China's overcapacity industry and infrastructure. Following Xi's ambitious and ambivalent slogans, bureaucrats and experts became active and generated a plethora of ideas, programs, and projects to expand the BRI like tidal



waves. Consequently, the BRI strategy rapidly grew to incorporate five-connectivity: policy, trade, investment, infrastructure, and culture, covering virtually all aspects of globalizing China.

BRI 1.0, however, was significant domestically, taking root as the new leader's signature foreign policy and passing through political, state, and social mobilization processes. Chinese investment banks, such as the Export-Import Bank, China Development Bank, and the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund, incentivized Chinese SOEs and local governments to support new projects and loans abroad. Reversing the political scare from Xi's early anti-corruption campaign and the financial tightening since 2014, China's foreign investment reached new heights in 2017 and 2018. Meanwhile, China's localities have the resources and autonomy to implement national guidelines flexibly; their BRI projects tend to fulfill local economic priorities shaped by local business interests. Due to different economic structures and priorities, local governments have interpreted the BRI differently and improvised with many BRI projects. As the following examples show, BRI served local commercial interests and stimulated investment and economic activities locally. Externally, the social and environmental impacts were less predictable.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, intentionality and intermediaries were inseparable conditions for influence. For example, should local governments be the main actors of the BRI, the strategy's intention and impact are likely to be more practical and localized than foreign policy or political power. Moreover, as localities have diverse economic structures and priorities, the BRI's sectoral and developmental impacts are likely different. For example, Chongqing had dominant SOEs, and its BRI implementation has focused on two directions, both led by local SOEs. First, the city started the "3 + N" scheme to help SOEs expand globally. Chongqing's Export-Import Bank, MOFCOM, and Foreign Trade Group, the three largest SOEs in the city, worked with other SOEs to jointly explore overseas markets. Second, it utilized China-Europe Railway projects and gave birth to various e-commerce companies that focus on importing consumer goods from Europe and selling them to customers in western China. From local SOEs' point of view, both sets of BRI projects have successfully boosted Chongqing's status in the Chinese and regional economies.

The eastern city of Ningbo had a mixed economy featuring strong state and private entrepreneurs. Its BRI implementation focused on increasing Ningbo's global profile to attract advanced investors and technologists from nearby Shanghai and Hangzhou. One signature program was the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Consortium, with an annual goods expo from CEE countries. Once CEE became an international grouping, Ningbo became the "global city" that hosts global events. Another signature program was Ningbo's Silk Road Maritime Shipping Index, created to rival the Baltic Index. In 2016, this Maritime Index was incorporated into China's 13th Five-Year Plan. Furthermore, Ningbo utilized the BRI to convert its Plum Mountain New Area into Zhejiang's Belt and Road Experiment Site, offering more favorable incentives to investors and managers in this new zone. Ningbo's southern neighbor Wenzhou had a predominantly private economy. Wenzhou's

BRI projects were nationally renowned and led by private entrepreneurs, including the Belt and Road Goods Expo held in Italy. Leveraging the BRI, Wenzhou's largest power device manufacturer expanded its business in Pakistan and constructed a large production site in Xi'an, the Silk Road Economic Belt's origin city.

The local intermediaries—Chongqing, Ningbo, and Wenzhou—defined the BRI's intentions in the initial stage, serving primarily commercial interests rather than geostrategic ones. The market-based expansions effectively stimulated growth in these localities and improved China's diplomatic and economic relationships with Germany (in Chongqing's case), CEE (via Ningbo), and Italy and Pakistan (through Wenzhou). However, problems did arise in many places: resistance to China increased in Eastern Europe, and in Pakistan, kidnapping and political violence were significant threats. The dynamic approach observes that the BRI's overall direction was consistent, though roadblocks and setbacks were inevitable and inherent amidst China's global rise. Studying the BRI and its setbacks, the BRI epistemic communities in China grew, generating new knowledge, networks, and mechanisms for China's global outreach. Overall, they argue that the BRI strategy has been more correct than wrong in the first decade. The direction to go out is clear, although the methods need adjustment.

### **BRI 1.5: Backlash and Adjustment**

As China's new global strategy, the BRI's early priority initially aimed to mobilize domestic interest in global outreach as soon as possible. However, its repercussions were heavily felt outside China, and not all were positive. Some commercially motivated projects failed to meet global social and environmental inclusion standards and assessments.<sup>20</sup> In Pakistan, China's energy projects were mainly coal-powered, raising grave concerns about environmental risks within the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>21</sup> The strategic rhetoric promoting the BRI and the “BRI fever” by Chinese actors during its implementation generated a host of external backlash and resistance. There is a growing fear that the BRI served as Beijing's economic statecraft to undermine recipient countries' independence and strategic resources, a concern that has proliferated in recent years.<sup>22</sup> The situation escalated when China took over Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port on a 99-year lease in 2018 after the host government failed to service its loans from China, heightening the perception of the BRI as a “debt trap.”<sup>23</sup>

Foreign opinions and strategic views on the BRI have deteriorated after 2017. A study at the State Council-affiliated Development Research Center found that in 2018 alone, thousands of reports were published on the BRI in the U.S., most of which were highly critical.<sup>24</sup> Public opinions on China and the Chinese capital have deteriorated sharply in recent years, narrowing Beijing's diplomatic maneuverability in the region.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on such anti-China political and popular discourse, the U.S. and its allies launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, gaining momentum to counteract the BRI. Such critical voices also lead renowned China scholar Minxin Pei to argue that the BRI should “die a quiet death.”<sup>26</sup>

However, as a global strategy, the BRI speaks to China's global ambition in the new era. It is consistent with China's moderate thinkers who aim to counteract the nationalist turn in China and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, China's bureaucracy, business sectors, and experts have invested heavily in the BRI, creating vested interests that are unlikely to fade. Many have recently underscored that the BRI is a crucial platform for breaking through anti-globalization trends both in China and globally.<sup>28</sup> Given the BRI's strategic significance, external criticisms have prompted policy actors in Beijing to reflect, recalibrate, and readjust their approach.

Recall Figure 5.1, the political leadership focused on mobilizing subnational actors to conduct BRI activities both within and outside China. However, policy-makers have continuously sought to regulate and control risky investment behaviors by local governments and state-owned companies. Consequently, the process of the BRI has been marked by ongoing readjustment and feedback. In 2015, for example, to caution Chinese companies against risky projects, NDRC emphasized, "[We] must insist on companies as the main actors and market as the driving mechanism. [We] must follow international norms and economic priorities; the companies are responsible for their own decisions, returns, and risks."<sup>29</sup> In 2016, MOFCOM began publishing annual social and political risk assessments and conducted training programs for China's outbound investors. However, due to state fragmentation, regulatory bodies in Beijing have struggled to effectively control and oversee BRI activities conducted by local actors both domestically and abroad.

Interestingly, the intensifying external pushback enhanced the role of central agencies in the BRI after 2017, as they warned the leadership of the BRI's challenges and the cost of unregulated commercial behavior. Notably, in early 2019, leading up to the second BRI Summit, the bureaucracy was open and receptive to foreign input and suggestions. The NDRC, in particular, strengthened the Third-Market Cooperation Mechanism in China's BRI, forming inter-governmental working groups, arranging cooperation between Chinese and Western MNCs, and inviting joint sponsorship with multinational institutions.<sup>30</sup> In mid-2019, as the second BRI Summit was held, statements and documents showcased political and bureaucratic recalibration. The leadership, changing from the earlier rhetoric of "the project of the century," underscored green and sustainable development and cooperation as key to achieving "high quality" BRI construction. The Summit emphasized that the BRI aimed to facilitate United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. At the bureaucratic level, the NDRC joined United Nations agencies to publish the "One Belt One Road Green Lighting Action Initiative" and the "Belt and Road Green and High-Efficiency Cooling Action Initiative." Such initiatives promoted clean energy and green technology, addressing the environmental concerns of BRI projects.

Addressing external criticism of the BRI's predatory lending, China's Ministry of Finance published "the One Belt One Road Sustainable Debt Analysis Framework" and pledged to improve BRI countries' debt servicing ability and achieve sustainable and inclusive development. China's Commercial and Industrial Bank published the first Belt and Road Green Bond at the Summit. The MOFCOM arranged

conferences and activities that involved exchange and joint investment plans between Chinese and foreign companies. The Ministry of Science and Technology announced innovation exchanges with BRI countries that would include 5,000 people in five years. China's Environmental Protection Agency committed to training 1,500 officials in BRI countries and establishing technology exchange and diffusion centers along the Belt and Road.

The academic exchanges between China and BRI countries increased at the second Belt and Road Summit. The Chinese Academy of Sciences announced scholarships for graduate students from BRI countries. With the partnership with the World Bank, legal scholars in China started the BRI Joint Legal Study Program, focusing on anti-corruption training for companies operating in BRI countries. In addition, specialists representing China, international organizations, and business communities published the "Beijing Initiative on Clean Silk Road." Correspondingly, China waged several high-profile corruption charges against senior banks and SOE managers involved in BRI projects.

These policy readjustments show that Beijing was concerned about the external backlash against BRI implementation. Different agencies devised measures within their domains to address these concerns, and bilateral exchanges between China and BRI partner countries saw a significant boost. The idea of BRI 2.0 was circulated in 2019 and was expected to lead to a more moderate and institutionalized BRI in the next stage.<sup>31</sup> However, in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, putting the BRI's future in flux. Some questioned its survivability after the pandemic, while others highlighted its potential for triumphant expansion in the post-pandemic world.<sup>32</sup> Domestic discussions and actions in 2020 show that neither the BRI's death nor dominance was the likely outcome.<sup>33</sup> At the policy level, the BRI continued to address China's geopolitical, diplomatic, and economic challenges. SOEs, local governments, and national agencies maintained their globalization during COVID-19 while adapting to new realities in a pandemic-shaped world. Meanwhile, scholarly discussions emphasized "softer" projects, such as public health, crisis management, and the digital economy. As the pandemic halted physical connectivity and large infrastructure, BRI implementation increasingly featured scientific communities, internet-enabled companies, and trade via rail routes from China to Europe and other BRI countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by altered structural conditions underlying the BRI. Strategically, the U.S. and China rivalry was clarified and expanded, focusing on international order, ideologies, and technological security. As Western democracies joined America's anti-China rally and Beijing formed closer alignment with anti-Western countries, middle powers were diminishing, and the space for globalization was shrinking. Within China, manufacturing industries and infrastructure suffered the most, and the new economy developed rapidly; for example, the electric vehicles and associated sectors. Consequently, the BRI must operate in this bifurcated global landscape and transform domestic economic structures. Chinese scholars, central agencies, and companies are still active in carrying out the BRI, but with new thinking and emphasis.

**BRI 2.0: New Articulation in China**

From 2014 to 2017, BRI 1.0's scope and implementation rules were ambiguous, which worked to mobilize China's economic actors to globalize their business and activities rapidly. It also incentivized other countries' elites and businesses to approach the BRI for their own self-interest. The backlash, culminating from 2017 to 2019, included deteriorating public opinions toward China, intensified strategic pushback, and financial risks to China and the recipients. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries' inhospitable domestic politics and geopolitics tested the survivability of the BRI, while the U.S. rallied an anti-China coalition to impose harsher pressure on China. Inside China, nationalist voices, commonly called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, were pronounced in 2020, aggravating China's diplomacy with other countries. How should the BRI adapt? Can the BRI continue?

In early 2021, China held the Fifth Plenary of the 19th Party Congress, the Two Sessions, and the Boao Forum for Asia, the PRC's most crucial party, state, and international events. On each occasion, the leadership and top agencies publicized remarks and documents that indicate China's top domestic and foreign policy directions, including the BRI. These public and official documents helped distill China's overarching global strategy in the current period. First, Beijing plans to continue the BRI as one of its top foreign policies. Second, despite the deteriorating external environment, China will continue to pursue globalization. Finally, the BRI's new priorities will be sustainable development, resilient supply chains, and digital commerce.<sup>34</sup>

Compared to previous political rhetoric based on metaphors and slogans, BRI 2.0's documents were more precise and narrower and indicated new endeavors in China's global operations. Moreover, judging from the BRI roadmaps and mechanisms published by China's top think tank scholars, the implementation of BRI 2.0 has focused on more specified, transparent, and institutionalized operations in the future. This direction is also confirmed by preliminary moves from financial bankers and local governments. An important caveat is in order, however. While the Chinese experts and policy advisers have incorporated years of trial and error and articulated a better-formed BRI strategy, their writings in Chinese have gained little attention or attraction abroad. Therefore, considering the strategic environment China faces worldwide, it is uncertain whether this round of "rationalization" of the BRI will help China's foreign policy in the foreseeable future.

**The BRI's Strategic Rethinking**

The BRI remains China's primary global strategy. Nevertheless, the Chinese intermediaries are expected to continuously deliberate and adapt their approaches to the strategy. The Chinese writing on BRI 2.0 indicates four directions of rethinking. First, policy research has been emphasized, and the quality of research has been improved. Unlike previous opinion pieces, this round of BRI publications is based on rich empirical materials and reasonably balanced reasoning. For example, scholars at Fudan and Tsinghua Universities conducted a global big-data analysis of BRI

expansion.<sup>35</sup> Based on 192 countries from 2014 to 2019, the scholars investigated their decisions to join or not join the BRI. After controlling for strategic, political, and economic factors, their study shows the diffusion mechanism in which BRI expansion follows regional waves. The most significant cause of a country's decision to join the BRI is the decision of its neighbors.

Qualitative research has been abundant. For example, Shanghai-based Wang Rui and Beijing-based Zhao Yuangliang researched China's positions and choices in the Indian Ocean Rim.<sup>36</sup> Funded by China's National Social Science Foundation to search for policy responses to the America-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, the publication embodies rich information on China's economic presence in the region across time. It conducts a balanced analysis of various regional institutions. Based on such research, the authors create a more realistic roadmap for China to employ the Blue Economy strategy to stabilize its regional roles. Other policy pieces have similarly strong empirical foundations.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, new Chinese writing has provided concrete steps to help the BRI achieve new priorities. It is also considerably more articulate concerning specific priorities. While the ideas are not brand-new, they are elaborated with systematic policy-relevant research and are more operational. For example, in arguing for People's Livelihood (*minsheng*) BRI, Liu explains what constitutes the BRI's livelihood projects—jobs, convenient living (water, electricity, roads, and digital networks), education and culture, public safety, including medical, health care, and disaster prevention, and humanitarian assistance.<sup>38</sup> In discussing China's policies in the Indian Ocean, Wang and Zhao concretized China's "Blue Economy" strategy in a set of implementable steps: in terms of soft mechanisms, increasing dialogues, workshops, and sectoral coordination; in terms of institutions, supporting the roles of India-led Indian Ocean Navy Summit and the business-led Indian Ocean Fishing Association.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, while arguing for the BRI's aspiration to become a global public good, Shi Jingxia articulates the legalization of the BRI, which specifies the roles of "soft" laws—memoranda of understanding, declarations, guidelines, standards, action plans, and codes of conduct—in identifying common interests, building shared values and principles, and increasing the willingness to cooperate.<sup>40</sup> The "hard" laws, in Shi's framework, include bilateral investment treaties and regional and multilateral investment agreements. She further explains that different concerns in the BRI should consider different types of laws and institutions; for example, investors' risks must be ensured through commercial mechanisms and existing rights guarantees.

Li Xiangyang went beyond his previous advocacy of economic statecraft and elaborated on conducting the BRI practically and rationally. Concretely, Li articulates, in government-government cooperation, 1) China should provide concessionary conditions to less developed countries; 2) BRI projects need to have bilateral and regional provisions to avoid moral and economic losses; 3) China should use international laws to rein in moral hazard in the host countries, promoting unbinding "soft" laws to become binding "hard" laws. As an economic strategist, Li cautioned that China should have reasonable self-positioning and

make “reasonable” investments. Ultimately, Li observes that there are no optimal answers to China’s foreign policy. However, increasing transparency, balancing input and output, and exiting before sinking in comprise what he calls “suboptimal choices.”<sup>41</sup>

Thirdly, the new BRI publications reveal significant theoretical improvements from China over prevalent Western theories and concepts. For example, while economic statecraft has been a heavily employed concept in Western security literature on China,<sup>42</sup> Li Xiangyang’s BRI diplomacy combines hard power and soft power, soft rules and hard laws, and national properties as defining different statecrafts. More importantly, Li’s recent publication underscores that foreign policy is “a complex and systematic project,” and the BRI’s current stage is just “the beginning of a long-term trial and error.” In short, economic statecraft has limitations, but it is a necessary part of foreign policy, requiring continuous adaptation and reform over time. Guo Shuyong and Yu Yang also provided a rethinking of rationality in international relations. Systematically, the publication recounts the rise of “individual rationality” (*geren lixing*) and “institutional rationality” (*zhidu lixing*) in the West and ongoing changes in world politics, such as rising non-Western powers engaged in diverse interactions and globalization that makes “nationalist” policymaking infeasible. Therefore, Guo and Yu argue for a new type of rationality, “interactive rationality,” in which interactions reflect reality, repeated interactions change relations, and interactions lead to new consensus and generate new knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the BRI’s new articulation demonstrates China’s rethinking and revision of ongoing international laws and grand strategies that reflect China’s norms and new realities in the world. On legal provision, Shi Jingxia extensively reviewed relevant international laws from Western experiences and explained China’s updates through law-making in the BRI platform. For example, she suggests two pathways: 1) China updates and reforms existing rules and laws to increase the voices of developing countries, and 2) China leads the creation of a variety of non-binding “soft” laws and, once tested, promotes its transition to binding laws. The piece on “the Blue Economy” strategy in the Indian Ocean region presents a novel approach to strategic rebalancing.

The proposal also demonstrates the “emergent properties” of China’s great power politics in the new era. It especially integrates domestic politics and foreign policy. The Blue Economy idea came first from the 2012 Blue Economy Development strategy announced by Xi Jinping, targeting the construction and expansion of Ningbo-Zhoushan Ports and the near sea. In 2017, NDRC and State Oceanic Administration joined hands to publish *the Belt and Road Vision on Oceanic Cooperation*. The strategy utilizes economic, business, and regional actors as the leading players in developing the Indian Ocean Blue Economy as a counterbalancing against the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Blue Economy was identified to promote oceanic transportation, joint resources exploration in oil and gas, and manage fishing rights equitably and sustainably. In proposing the Blue Economy, the proposal advocates Beijing’s advisory, agenda-setting roles in the Indian Ocean region but cautions against the so-called “leadership” positioning.

In short, the new thinking by Chinese policy actors has underscored transparency, institutionalization, and accountability, addressing external criticisms and domestic need for risk mitigation. Clearly, while ambiguity had worked in the BRI's initial stage (2014 to 2017), it has become a vulnerability to China's diplomacy, contributing to political backlash, financial risks, and strategic fallout, a type of influence externalities emphasized in the introduction chapter. Subsequently, recalibration is a natural outcome of the BRI's trial and error. More importantly, the rethinking demonstrates Beijing's repositioning of its global roles, which will be significant for China and the world. Across the board, experts have advised against China's global-leadership roles, and instead advocated China's efforts to reform, improve, and diversify existing regional and global rules and laws.

Furthermore, experts argue that as China's global strategy, the BRI should be a force for good, emphasizing equitable distribution worldwide, poverty alleviation in less developed countries, and sustainable development that works for the environment. Through the BRI, China's foreign policy experts have gained greater confidence after years of trial and error. They are more articulate in promoting Chinese-style international relations, as shown in complex strategies, interactive rationality, and adaptive economic statecraft. In addition to the experts' publications, China's bureaucrats and businesses also show more clarity in the direction of the BRI in the coming years.

The top financial regulators and bankers have explored "reasonable" ways to continue BRI investment in the post-pandemic era.<sup>44</sup> Hu Xiaolian, president of China's Export-Import Bank, explained that China's debt restructuring, or reduction, regarding BRI countries, should focus on "zaoxue" (creat[ing] new blood). That is, debts should be restructured to bring sustainable investment. Specific sectors include transportation, electricity, and industry. Besides debt forgiveness toward the least developed countries, BRI debt restructuring should bring investments from advanced countries while safeguarding debt risks. Jin Liquan, the chairman of AIIB, urged investors to refinance rather than stop financing indebted countries. Furthermore, he argues that pandemic control is the precondition to all other economic activities, and new funds should prioritize the containment of the pandemic. MOFCOM Vice Minister Qian Keming urged the bankers to reorient BRI infrastructure based on the three principles: 1) prioritize green, low-carbon energy sources and integrate with traditional energy companies; 2) encourage companies to conduct diligent planning, design, and construction of green infrastructure; 3) place "green visions" on all outbound investment, thus creating the "green China" brand.

Representing local governments' thinking in the new-era BRI, Huang Qifan, former mayor of Chongqing, has underscored the importance of China-Europe Railways in connecting China with neighboring Eurasian countries. Specifically, he emphasizes the connection between the BRI and China's "dual circulation" strategy. He explains that the BRI's next stage will promote closer industrial cooperation inside and outside China to "achieve smoother, safer, and more autonomous supply chain networks."<sup>45</sup> Yuan Jiajun, Party Secretary of Zhejiang, also underscores the BRI's role in Zhejiang's globalization and development.



He highlights Zhejiang's BRI accomplishments, such as the 16 + 1 framework, China–European Railways originated in Yiwu, and the China–Central and Eastern European Goods Expo in Ningbo. The BRI's next stage, in Yuan's view, is about promoting port transportation, e-commerce, and a complete supply chain in oil and gas.<sup>46</sup> Compared to the mobilization style "BRI fever" in the previous periods, local guidelines in this round are more precise and narrower in scope, integrating the BRI with other development initiatives in the localities. Therefore, the scale and impacts of the BRI are likely to be more limited in China but less risky, a central goal in this phase of articulation.

## Conclusions

The study of China's foreign policy and its effectiveness is rapidly expanding. This edited volume makes significant and timely contributions to the analysis of China's power and influence in the world. It systematizes the diverse causal factors and influence channels—such as intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions. The present chapter, focusing on the evolution of Chinese intermediaries in the BRI process, underscores the dynamic approach to analyze China's projection of influence and its outcomes. Specifically, it examines whose intentions matter and how they shape outcomes. While the leadership sets strategic goals in response to structural conditions, the actors responsible for policy and implementation often possess significant autonomy, leading to divergent behaviors and outcomes. Consequently, China's foreign policy reflects plural intentions, mirroring the diversity among intermediaries. Moreover, the intentions of the political, policy, and instrumental elites are subject to change as structural conditions evolve in response to economic or geopolitical shifts.

A dynamic approach yields more realistic and accurate policy predictions. After all, the effect of China's foreign policy, and the ability of Beijing to pursue global influence, are decided by the ability of Chinese state and business actors to adapt to diverse environments and changing contexts. Traditional snapshot-based analyses, focusing on China's behavior in specific countries at particular times, often overlook the multitude of actors engaged in various projects with varying effects. Meanwhile, the decentralized nature of China's international engagement hampers the formulation of uniform rules for BRI projects. While intermediaries enjoy considerable latitude, this decentralization impedes a cohesive and effective foreign policy response to the myriad challenges of the BRI. For instance, China faces challenges in the current global debt restructuring negotiations, lacking the authority to unilaterally address debt reduction in the developing world due to the involvement of multiple state and business actors. Specifically, Chinese negotiating bankers and trade officials do not have power or oversight on loan agreements signed by local governments and companies, raising funds through convoluted domestic credit markets. MOFCOM, MFA, and the People's Bank of China—actors leading global negotiations—have limited authority to write off the claiming rights within China.

Finally, the dynamic approach also finds that the BRI's plural intentions and multiple intermediaries can enhance the strategy and bolster China's global engagement, making it more sustainable and adaptable. Put simply, if one set of goals falters or a particular group stagnates, other interests and actors can step in to fill the void. For example, within the BRI, there has been a shift from coal power plants to renewable energy projects, from traditional infrastructure endeavors to investments in digitization and health sectors, and a reordering of priorities from export dominance to import preferences. Despite the upheavals caused by the pandemic and other global and domestic shifts, Beijing has doubled down on its commitment to the BRI as a cornerstone of its global strategy. While acknowledging the initial missteps during its first decade, there is an emerging consensus that the BRI remains the primary platform through which China asserts its global influence. Its success, however, is far from guaranteed, yet abandoning it could further isolate China on the global stage. Beijing has recognized the imperative of clarity and has emphasized the need for institutionalization, accountable laws, and a balanced posturing in articulating the BRI's direction and priorities. Nevertheless, due to the fragmented nature of actors and activities involved in the BRI, this shift toward institutionalization may have limited effects. It underscores the continuous interplay among intentions, intermediaries, and institutions surrounding the BRI's trajectory. Game on!

## Notes

- 1 Blanchard, 2021; Fung et al., 2022.
- 2 Grimes, 2016.
- 3 Lampton et al., 2020; Carrai, 2021.
- 4 Shi & Seim, 2021.
- 5 Wong, 2021.
- 6 Ye, 2020a, b.
- 7 Kastner & Pearson, 2021; Alves et al., 2023; Shi & Ye, 2021.
- 8 Fung et al., 2023.
- 9 Economy, 2018; Russel & Blake, 2020.
- 10 Miller, 2017; Wong, 2021.
- 11 Zeng & Li, 2019.
- 12 Li, 2020.
- 13 Gallagher & Kong, 2021.
- 14 Ye, 2020a, b; 2021.
- 15 Ye and Wu, 2024.
- 16 Li, 2021.
- 17 Li, 2021.
- 18 Ye, 2021a.
- 19 Yin et al., 2021.
- 20 Russel & Berger, 2019.
- 21 Downs, 2019.
- 22 Li, 2020.
- 23 Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021.
- 24 Zhang, 2020.
- 25 Acharya, 2020.

- 26 Pei, 2020.
- 27 Ye, 2021b.
- 28 Zheng, 2021.
- 29 NDRC, 2015.
- 30 Zhang, 2020.
- 31 Erie, 2020.
- 32 Ye, 2021c.
- 33 Ye, 2021a.
- 34 Xi, 2021.
- 35 Wen et al., 2021.
- 36 Wang & Zhao, 2021.
- 37 Liu, 2021; Li, 2021.
- 38 Liu, 2021.
- 39 Wang & Zhao, 2021.
- 40 Shi, J., 2021.
- 41 Li, 2021.
- 42 Kastner, 2009; Norris, 2016; Wong, 2021.
- 43 Guo & Yu, 2021.
- 44 Zhou et al., 2021.
- 45 Huang, 2020.
- 46 Yuan, 2021.

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## **Part IV**

# **Institutions**



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## 6 The Limits of Chinese Influence in the Philippines

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In 2018, the China Road and Bridge Corporation broke ground on two major bridge projects in Manila. Funded by grants from the Chinese government, Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte proclaimed that ‘China has once again proven that they intend to join [the Philippines] in achieving lasting progress.’<sup>1</sup> The bridges would ameliorate Manila’s traffic congestion, enhance the resilience of road networks, and contribute to local tourism. Two years into the project, however, Philippine Senators questioned why a large percentage of Chinese rather than Philippine workers were constructing the Binondo-Intramuros and Estrella-Pantaleon bridges.<sup>2</sup>

The controversy over Chinese-funded infrastructure projects represents Philippine ambivalence toward Chinese economic outreach and public diplomacy, as well as broader questions about the efficacy of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Attention to Chinese influence – both in its material (i.e., geostrategic and economic) and ideational manifestations – has grown significantly within the region. The influx of Chinese capital and infrastructure investment throughout the Indo-Pacific region has enabled Beijing to expand its good neighbor strategy.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, Chinese economic coercion, increasing military assertiveness, and so-called ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy have also generated backlash, leading many regional experts to question the efficacy of Beijing’s public diplomacy. And the recent recalibration of Philippine foreign policy under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., signaled by the administration’s reaffirmation of the US–Philippine alliance, only underscores the limited impact of Chinese public diplomacy.

Using the Philippines as a ‘most-likely’ case, this chapter investigates a specific dimension of Chinese influence – the role of public diplomacy – to understand the impact and limits of Chinese influence abroad. Despite a sharp rise in public diplomacy efforts in recent years, Filipino perceptions of trust toward China have remained consistently negative. This chapter examines why and how Chinese efforts at public diplomacy have fallen short in positively affecting Filipino perceptions of China, even when an overtly pro-China Philippine president entered office.

Chinese influence and its efforts at public diplomacy must be evaluated within the context of other forms of Chinese influence (whether intentional or unintentional), including economic and strategic influence. Understanding Chinese influence also requires greater disaggregation, examining different intermediaries of Chinese influence, and also the domestic institutional (and ideational) environment of the targeted state.<sup>4</sup> In the Philippine case, Chinese incursions in the West Philippine



Sea (WPS) and Chinese corrosive capital investments (most notably in online gaming investments) have elicited a strong nationalist response from Filipinos that in turn perpetuates perceptions of China as untrustworthy and threatening. Adopting the *three Is* framework offered by the editors of this volume, this chapter explains how Chinese external influence interacts with domestic factors within the targeted state to alter the intended effects of public diplomacy. Key domestic constituents in the Philippines were injected with a strong sense of national identity, which was in part elicited by unintentional forms of negative influence generated by Chinese quasi-military actions in the WPS or 'corrosive' Chinese investments. Filipinos thus became less receptive to Chinese public diplomacy efforts.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Section one establishes the scope conditions by defining what the authors mean by 'influence' and 'public diplomacy.' Section two offers some context behind Chinese influence and public diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region taking into account intentionality, intermediaries, and especially institutions. Of note is how domestic factors within the targeted state, including anti-foreign sentiment and nationalist identity, mediate public diplomacy outcomes. Section three addresses the data and methods in evaluating how Philippine national identity, made salient by ongoing disputes and clashes with China in the WPS and economic investments, confounds Chinese efforts at public diplomacy. The authors find that while public diplomacy may have achieved some immediate gains – such as increased interest in Chinese language and culture or concessions to Chinese state-owned companies – it has not affected mass attitudes toward China, a crucial goal of public diplomacy. Section four discusses how the WPS conflict elicits Philippine national identity, shaping perceptions of China, which undermine public diplomacy efforts. Section five concludes by assessing Chinese influence as the US also ramps up its support and influence for the current Marcos Jr. government.

## **Influence and Public Diplomacy**

### ***Influence***

When studying influence in the context of China, Evelyn Goh distinguishes influence from power by equating the latter as 'resources and latent capability' and the former as the effective use of said power to modify or 'have an impact upon another actor's preferences or behavior in favor of one's own aims.'<sup>5</sup> Influence and power are conceptually related but analytically distinct in that power (i.e., wealth and military capabilities) does not always translate to influence. As Goh observes, there is 'considerable 'slippage' in how much China manages to – or wants to – convert its growing resources into international influence.'<sup>6</sup>

'Influence' can be conceptually parsed into several different categories.<sup>7</sup> For instance, researchers might hone in on a specific dimension of influence, such as strategic influence, economic influence, or cultural influence. Influence can also be examined through its different modalities, such as coercion, inducement, and persuasion. Goh's volume offers a more sophisticated framework where influence

is exercised through various means, including discursive persuasion, or by shaping the agenda of regional and global institutions.<sup>8</sup> More recently, concerns have arisen where foreign governments seek to influence the domestic politics of another government covertly or through disinformation campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

While recognizing different modalities of Chinese influence, this chapter focuses on influence in the form of public diplomacy, which has garnered much less attention from international relations scholars relative to research on China's strategic, economic, and global institutional influence.<sup>10</sup> Of course, different types of influence interact with and affect the direction of public diplomacy, and not always in a positive way. However, the rapid expansion of Chinese public diplomacy efforts in the Indo-Pacific region warrants a closer look at public diplomacy on its own merit.

### ***Public Diplomacy***

This chapter uses a broad definition of public diplomacy adopted from the *Ties That Bind* study produced by AidData in 2018 that encompasses different activities related to 'influence.'<sup>11</sup> Defined as 'a collection of instruments used by state and non-state actors from a sending country with at least some intention of influencing the perceptions, preferences, and actions of foreign citizens in a receiving country in favor of the sending country's interests,' it should be clear that public diplomacy acts as a tool of influence.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the related concept of soft power, public diplomacy involves a deliberate, 'conscious act of communicating with foreign publics,' and is therefore an important facilitator of soft power.<sup>13</sup>

A state engages in public diplomacy for several reasons. Such reasons include boosting recognition and visibility, promoting a better understanding of national policies, drawing support for foreign policy priorities, building relationships, reflecting a positive global image, spreading particular values and ideas, providing economic benefits, managing crises, and countering negative perceptions.<sup>14</sup> The sending state's 'target audience' may include public officials, opinion leaders in the private and public sector, the media, civil society, educators, students, and more specific social, economic, and political groups such as the diaspora, business groups, trade organizations, and interest groups.

Whereas public diplomacy was once seen as a government-oriented activity with information flowing unidirectionally between the sending and receiving state, more recent formulations of public diplomacy emphasize two-way communication between sending and receiving states (and their respective civil societies) through exchanges, dialogue, and collaboration.<sup>15</sup> Whether disseminating positive messages about its culture, values, beliefs, and policies for a mass audience or 'facilitating positive interactions' between people to improve bilateral ties, both 'push' and 'push-and-pull factors' remain equally relevant for public diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> Push strategies can include informational and cultural diplomacy activities via traditional media and the establishment of cultural centers and educational programs. Push-and-pull strategies may involve exchange activities and study tours among future leaders, educators, and thought leaders.<sup>17</sup>

## **The Impact of Chinese Influence and Public Diplomacy**

### ***Public Diplomacy and China***

Public diplomacy is both a foreign and relatively new concept in China.<sup>18</sup> In the past, the terms 对外宣传 (external propaganda) and 民间外交 (people-to-people diplomacy) have been used to describe government efforts to broadcast Chinese achievements and boost its image at home and abroad.<sup>19</sup> According to Wang Yiwei, the practice of public diplomacy in China developed in earnest in the early 1980s with the establishment of a Chinese news spokesperson system initially led by an official from the information department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>20</sup> This system expanded both nationally and locally with the establishment of the State Council Information Office in 1991. It should be noted that the primary audience for explaining Chinese foreign policy was not initially the foreign public, but rather a Chinese domestic audience, akin to what might be referred to as 'public affairs' in the West.<sup>21</sup>

Public diplomacy took on a more external dimension with the creation of the Division for Public Diplomacy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2004. With China's rise, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw a need to move beyond traditional diplomacy and promote soft power and public diplomacy to shape a favorable external environment.<sup>22</sup> More resources would be needed to counter the growing China-threat thesis while reaffirming the CCP's narrative of China's peaceful rise and development. New programs were also established to engage foreign civil society around this time. A pilot program of the first Confucius Institute (CI) was set up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2004, and the first official CI was established in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2004.<sup>23</sup> China has thus eschewed its earlier 'low profile' approach to foreign policy to a more outward-looking strategy of 'striving for achievement,' thereby generating the need for a larger, more systematic strategy for public diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, Chinese public diplomacy has advanced in line with public diplomacy as more typically conceived in the West and in conjunction with its broader strategic objectives. With the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and Xi Jinping's promise of the China Dream, China heavily invested in a public diplomacy strategy that conveyed a 'narrative of strength, self-assurance, affluence, and political responsibility.'<sup>25</sup> Toward that aim, Chinese public diplomacy has been pursued with five objectives according to Wang:

- 1) more strongly publicizing the Chinese government's statements and assertions to the outside world, 2) forming a desirable image of the state, 3) issuing rebuttals to distorted overseas reports about China, 4) improving the international environment surrounding China, and 5) exerting influence on the policy decisions of foreign countries.<sup>26</sup>

China has used different means to engage in public diplomacy, including summit diplomacy, informational (or media) diplomacy, people-to-people engagement, and cultural exchanges. Summit diplomacy has enabled Chinese leaders to interact with the general public during high-level official visits by holding interviews with

the local media, speaking at universities, and meeting with private business leaders. China has also expanded its media presence, producing daily economic, political, cultural, and special interest reports on Chinese affairs and China's influence in regional and global affairs.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the rapid rise of CIs globally has borne the hallmark of people-to-people and cultural diplomacy.

Chinese public diplomacy in the Philippines remains consistent with the broader aims of Xi Jinping's objective 'to better present China to the world' through the 'Chinese Dream.'<sup>28</sup> To promote China's neighborhood diplomacy, an emphasis has been made on the idea of a 'community of shared future' where values such as amity, mutual prosperity, and cooperation are highlighted as China's priorities when deploying public diplomacy toward neighboring countries.<sup>29</sup> For instance, high-level statements addressed to Filipino audiences frequently highlight the aims of China's peaceful development concerning the Philippines' overall development prospects.<sup>30</sup>

China also uses public diplomacy to reinforce its resolute position regarding its territorial dispute with the Philippines while emphasizing its preference for bilateral dialogue and consultations with its counterparts.<sup>31</sup> Overall, China's public diplomacy in the Philippines seeks to tell China's story by presenting the country as a peaceful neighbor sharing similar legacies and aspirations. At the same time, the uptick in Chinese public diplomacy in the Philippines also reflects Beijing's recognition of a distinct window of opportunity in the Philippines offered by the rise of President Duterte in 2016. Duterte's strong pro-China position has given Chinese diplomats an additional incentive to build stronger ties and inroads with the Philippine domestic polity with the aim of driving a wedge in the US–Philippine alliance.

### ***Determining the Efficacy of Chinese Public Diplomacy***

The broad objective of China's public diplomacy activities is garnering more favorable public perceptions of China and shaping policy decisions made by foreign governments in line with Beijing's policy preferences.<sup>32</sup> However, variation undoubtedly exists in the scope and intensity of public diplomacy outreach across Asia. The role and dynamics of Chinese intermediaries as they operate in a specific country, as well as the domestic institutional landscape, will shape the degree to which Chinese influence becomes effective (or ineffective) in a targeted country. Unanticipated or unintended interactions may also enhance or undermine public diplomacy efforts. For instance, domestic crimes periodically committed by Chinese nationals or the negative perceptions of Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) operated by Chinese nationals affect local attitudes toward China.<sup>33</sup>

Determining the efficacy of public diplomacy is difficult because of its contingent nature. Public diplomacy activities do not take place in a political vacuum. For example, a country seen as strategically significant but still hostile toward China may receive a heavier dose of public diplomacy outreach, whereas a China-friendly country may receive less diplomatic outreach. However, indicators measuring the

effectiveness of public diplomacy (e.g., favorable public attitudes; promotion of Chinese values) may register more positively in the latter than the former country despite minimal exposure to Chinese public diplomacy. Hence one must measure the relative change in outcomes, such as mass attitudes toward China or the degree of public policy support, and not whether attitudes are (dis)favorable to China at any single point in time. Additionally, even if the CCP does everything right in its public diplomacy outreach, missteps in security or economic policies will negate any positive impact. Beyond the intentions and intentionality of the influencing state, public diplomacy is shaped by different intermediaries and also filtered through domestic institutions of the target state.

### **Domestic Politics and Nationalism as a Mediating Factor**

When measuring public diplomacy effectiveness, there is a tendency to focus on the sending rather than the targeted or receiving state, especially when the sending state is a great power. However, the impact of public diplomacy may rest as much on the receiving state and how domestic actors and institutions respond to Chinese influence as much as it does on Beijing's outreach efforts.<sup>34</sup> As Aileen Baviera has found in her study of Chinese influence in the Philippines, the 'role and interplay of domestic stakeholders' significantly affect policy outcomes.<sup>35</sup>

Domestic politics can play a mediating effect on public diplomacy in several ways. At the top, different national leaders may exhibit their preferences and biases toward particular countries. For instance, in the Philippines, President Duterte's pro-China position contrasts that of his predecessor, the late Benigno Aquino III, who perceived China as a major threat. Other officials sitting in influential positions such as the heads of the foreign affairs or defense ministries may also sway how receiving states respond to Chinese influence. Regime type may also matter in how information is filtered to domestic audiences. In autocracies, communication from China may be more straightforward as autocratic governments filter information about China consistent with their official narrative.

Whereas some attention has been given to the role of individual leaders, domestic institutions, political factions, and interest groups in mediating foreign influence, the authors are unaware of any studies that look specifically at national identity as a contributing factor to public diplomacy's (in)effectiveness in a receiving country. Using the case of the Philippines, this chapter explores how national identity mediates the effect of Chinese influence broadly and public diplomacy outreach at the mass level more specifically. When national identity is primed against the sending state, public diplomacy falls flat, even under relatively favorable domestic conditions.

In the case of the Philippines under Duterte, the uptick in Chinese public diplomacy activities has done little to improve Filipinos' perceptions of China. Although Beijing may have made some 'tactical gains' among a few key political elites,<sup>36</sup> a high degree of distrust toward China persists.<sup>37</sup> This trend has continued under the Marcos Jr. government.

**Chinese Strategic and Economic Influence as Triggers of Nationalism**

Chinese actions on the strategic and economic front have heightened Filipino nationalist sentiment, thus eliciting negative images of China and undercutting any public diplomatic inroads that have been made in the past decade. Although Figure 6.1 below does not illustrate all forms of potential Chinese influence on the Philippines, it suggests how Chinese public diplomacy efforts, in the wake of other looming strategic and economic influence operations, are filtered through Philippine domestic factors.

The rise of the China threat narrative should have an overall dampening effect on Chinese public diplomacy.<sup>38</sup> The threat narrative is borne out in data from the Pew Research Center, where all 14 countries surveyed in 2020 held more negative views about China than in 2019.<sup>39</sup> Tensions are further exacerbated when external Chinese security and economic influence heightens feelings of nationalism and increases the salience of national identity.<sup>40</sup>

Territorial disputes tend to boost nationalist sentiment and evoke national identity. For instance, in South Korea and Japan, civil society groups have pushed a nationalist campaign to lay claim to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Alexander Bukh refers to these actors as ‘national identity entrepreneurs.’<sup>41</sup> As Bukh further explains, ‘territorial disputes are socially constructed, namely that the meanings associated with these disputed territories and the narratives about them, emerged as a result of sociopolitical process.’<sup>42</sup> Whether in the East Sea (Sea of Japan) or South China Sea (WPS), territorial disputes are often infused with nationalist narratives. The absence of any significant material value paradoxically expands a territory’s symbolic meaning, stemming from ‘shared sentiment regarding the territory’s importance to the nation.’<sup>43</sup> Territory thus

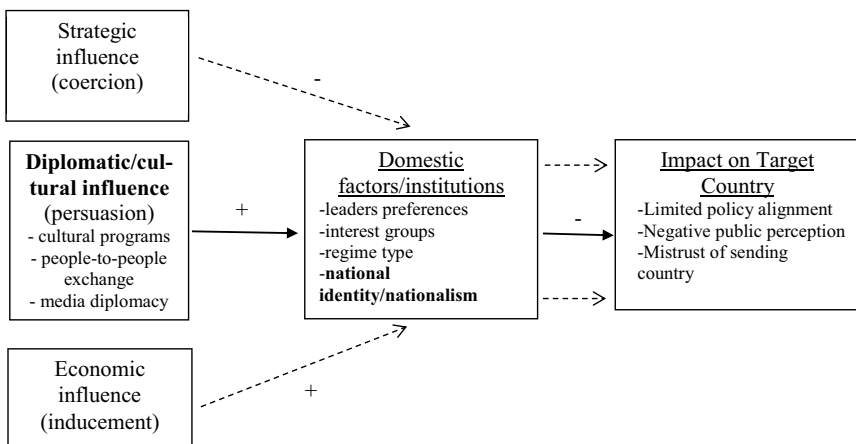


Figure 6.1 How domestic institutions mediate Chinese public diplomacy and other forms of influence.

becomes an expression of national identity, particularly for those in the defense and security establishment.

In the case of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the Philippine government only began using the name 'West Philippine Sea' in 2011 in response to repeated Chinese sovereignty claims over Scarborough Shoal. The name was officially changed in 2012, designating the waters within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone as the WPS.<sup>44</sup> By defining Scarborough Shoal, the Spratly Islands, and the WPS as part of the Philippine homeland, government and citizens alike have reconstructed these territories as sacred within national discourse.<sup>45</sup> Homeland and territory, when socially constructed, thus become an important marker of national identity. Unsurprisingly then, Chinese incursions in the WPS have triggered anti-China protests on numerous occasions in Manila. Such anti-foreign protests thus evoke national identity and reflect strong nationalist sentiment.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to Chinese coercion in the WPS, Chinese online gambling investments through the POGO scheme – constituting a significant portion of Chinese capital in the Philippines – have generated influence externalities through their significant presence and associated criminal activities, often fueling national outrage linked to China's broader relations with the country.<sup>47</sup> As Alvin Camba has noted, Chinese gaming operations enjoy limited taxation, bringing an influx of Chinese workers and demand, which pushes real estate prices up that effectively competes with local demand.<sup>48</sup> It is common for Filipinos to face higher rent or be displaced as landlords prioritize Chinese POGO workers willing to pay higher premiums.<sup>49</sup> And more recently, the national legislature launched high-profile investigations against POGOs citing 'wide-scale scam operations... money laundering, human trafficking and other related offenses,' leading President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to order the closure of all POGO establishments by the end of 2024.<sup>50</sup> This move earned overwhelming support with 83% of the population supporting the ban.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond POGOs, major Chinese Official Development Assistance infrastructure projects, such as the Kaliwa Dam project and the Chico River Pump Irrigation project, have also received much skepticism from the Filipino public. Despite the proactive roles of local elites in deploying these projects as documented by Camba, the negative perceptions surrounding these projects are still associated with broader narratives about malign Chinese engagement in the Philippines.<sup>52</sup> News of debt traps with China in other developing countries has also made its way into local Philippine narratives of China.<sup>53</sup> Recent surveys have shown that nine out of ten Filipinos disagree that China has good intentions toward Filipino interests.<sup>54</sup> Instead of improving Filipino perceptions, Chinese economic influence has magnified local skepticism toward China in conjunction with anti-China sentiments arising from territorial disputes. It is thus argued that China's repeated territorial claims, and social exclusion and negative externalities generated by Chinese investments, triggered strong feelings of nationalism and perpetuated negative perceptions among key sectors of the Philippine government such as the military as well as ordinary Filipinos.

## **Empirical Evidence**

Reflecting the intentionality of Chinese public diplomacy, the following section presents empirical evidence indicating a significant increase in Chinese outreach efforts in the Philippines across several dimensions. Indicators include online newspaper, radio, television broadcast, and social media content for China's informational diplomacy; data on scholarship and exchange programs for cultural and exchange diplomacy; and official online releases from the Chinese embassy in the Philippines and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). Next, data from the Social Weather Survey Station indicating declining net trust in China under the Duterte government is presented.

### ***Chinese Public Diplomacy Efforts in the Philippines***

#### *Informational Diplomacy*

The Philippines, under Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, has received more proactive public diplomacy efforts from China relative to past administrations. Since 2016, China's public diplomacy efforts intensified and were further institutionalized under different mediums. For instance, print news outlets such as *The Philippine Star* and *Manila Bulletin* dedicated space for news chapters and political commentaries published by China's state media.<sup>55</sup> In the case of *The Philippine Star*, the section 'Window to China' co-managed by the Chinese Embassy in Manila began reproducing official statements and high-level official speeches on global political issues in 2015. By 2018, this section had expanded to include news from other Chinese state media sources, most notably *Xinhua* news agency, in addition to occasional chapters from embassy staff. A brief review of content made available on weekly editions online reveals that the section predominantly publishes political commentaries on global affairs highlighting China's perspectives and official positions.

Improving Sino-Philippine bilateral relations and ASEAN-China relations are also common subjects covered in this section, indicating the political nature of 'Window to China.'<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the *Manila Bulletin* includes a dedicated section titled 'The Many Facets of China,' which appears weekly in print format and is co-managed by the Chinese embassy in Manila. Overall, these two mainstream Philippine news outlets continue to serve as spaces for Chinese state media to reproduce content that aims to increase awareness about China's political positions concerning Sino-Philippine relations.

The proactiveness of China's informational diplomacy is also apparent in television and radio programs hosted by local networks. For instance, 'Wow China,' launched by Radyo Pilipinas 738 in 2017, acts as a weekly platform for content produced by China Radio International and the University of the Philippines Confucius Institute. Radyo Pilipinas 738 operates under the supervision of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO). Their hour-long programs consist of interviews and conversations with Filipino and Chinese guests, mostly discussing personal experiences on Chinese and Filipino culture, and various topics related to



people-to-people exchanges. The program also maintains an active social media presence where they reproduce and share short video content from CGTN and other state media sources that broadly discuss China's foreign policies. In addition, the program introduces Chinese culture to Filipino audiences (and vice versa) and aims to establish familial relations between the two countries, as indicated by their social media hashtag: 'China and Philippines are siblings.'<sup>57</sup>

Chinese television is also ramping up in the Philippines, competing with Korean and Japanese dramas through its 'China Theater' program. Launched in 2018, the program sought to partner with the People's Television Network (PTV-4), the official TV station of the national government, in hosting Chinese content ranging from 'Chinese TV series, documentaries, cartoons, and movies dubbed in Tagalog.'<sup>58</sup> Similar to the intent of 'Wow China,' China's partnership with PTV-4 introduces Chinese popular culture to a wider Filipino audience. As former Chinese ambassador to the Philippines Zhao Jianhua stated, 'China Theater' serves as a 'new window... to better understand China, its people, their long history, their rich culture, their daily lives, their endeavor, and their dreams.'<sup>59</sup>

### *Cultural and Exchange Diplomacy*

Beyond the one-way push of informational diplomacy, China has developed its 'push-pull' strategy by investing greater resources in exchange diplomacy with the Philippines. For example, recipients of the China Government Scholarship (Bilateral Program) from the Philippines increased from only seven awardees in 2013 to 80 awardees in 2019.<sup>60</sup> In 2014, the Chinese Embassy in Manila also launched the 'Chinese Ambassador Scholarship' (CAS) program for Filipino college students in state universities, following the same initiative launched in other developing countries.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, CAS saw a significant surge in beneficiaries under the current Duterte administration. From just 121 scholarship recipients between 2014 and 2017, the total number of recipients more than doubled to 300 as of 2020.<sup>62</sup>

Cultural diplomacy through CIs in the Philippines experienced considerable growth in terms of its overall presence and engagement. For example, the Angeles University Foundation CI, the largest institute in the Philippines in terms of the number of enrollees, saw a sharp increase in its student enrollment by 50% in 2017 – from roughly 20,000 students the previous year to 30,000 students.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, the programs and outreach conducted by these CIs have also expanded to include non-traditional engagements, such as providing language training to government personnel from different agencies including the DFA, the Bureau of Immigration, the PCOO, and various city colleges and universities through the League of Cities of the Philippines.<sup>64</sup> The Department of Education (DepEd) has also inked a memorandum of agreement with CI in 2019 to train language teachers in secondary education as Manila considers offering Mandarin language as part of the country's K–12 curriculum.<sup>65</sup> China's Hanban has also recently stepped up its efforts in the Philippines to establish additional CIs and widen its engagements in cultural diplomacy. Currently, the Philippines ranks third in Southeast Asia in terms of the total number of CIs, just behind Indonesia and Thailand.

### Mass Perceptions of China

Recent efforts to boost Chinese public (and financial) diplomacy in the Philippines have appeared to have some impact. For instance, former President Duterte and his close political allies have at times muted or qualified public criticism toward China regarding ‘debt trap’ concerns surrounding Chinese investment. Duterte has also avoided pursuing further action on the South China Sea/WPS following the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) ruling favoring the Philippines, despite the urging of the US and some ASEAN members to do so. While current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has obviously embraced a more assertive China policy, his vice president, Sara Duterte, the former president’s daughter, has remained more accommodating. Indeed, the ongoing domestic political competition between these two camps is significantly informed by their differences on China. It appears, therefore, that Chinese public and financial diplomacy, which saw a significant boost during the Duterte presidency, has had a lasting impact on Philippine elite perceptions and their politics. Filipino mass perceptions of China, on the other hand, seem to tell a different story. Figure 6.2 below indicates that the net perception of China has overall been negative the past two decades.

Although net public trust toward China entered positive territory during the first year of the Duterte administration, public perceptions rapidly declined again after 2017. In the most recent survey conducted in December 2023, net trust toward China had reached a near all-time low of  $-41$ .<sup>66</sup> Although public sentiment toward China is likely more nuanced than a binary ‘positive-negative’ outcome and is also susceptible to external shocks such as COVID-19, the negative attitudes expressed by Filipinos toward China have remained fairly robust the past decade, despite the significant boost in Chinese public diplomacy during the Duterte period.<sup>67</sup>

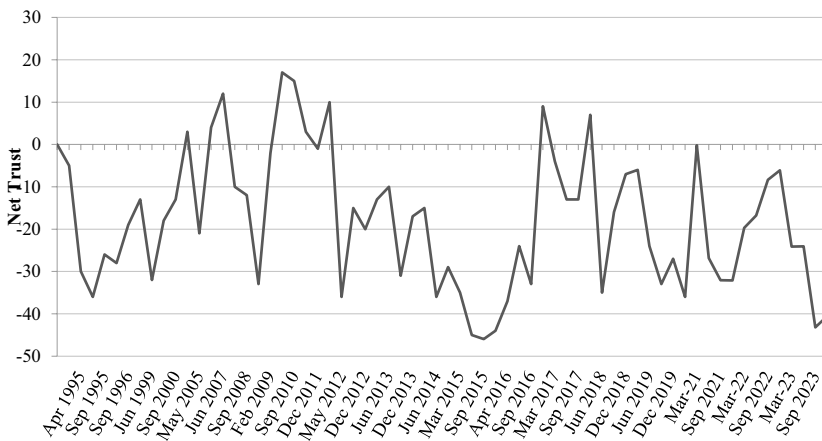


Figure 6.2 Philippines net trust in China, 1994–2023.

Source: Social Weather Survey Station.

To check whether trust toward China differed across socioeconomic classes, given that certain forms of public diplomacy are targeted toward elites rather than the masses, Social Weather Survey data based on socioeconomic class was disaggregated. While negative perceptions have persisted across the entire population, high-income Filipinos, which comprise about 10% of the population (ABC class), have registered more positive changes in their trust ratings under the Duterte administration.<sup>68</sup> Figure 6.3 below indicates net trust ratings of Filipinos toward China from 2010 to 2023 disaggregated by socioeconomic class (ABC, D, and E).

High-income Filipinos registered slightly larger gains in net trust under the Duterte government, suggesting that Chinese public diplomacy may have helped boost attitudes toward China among the privileged class in the early days of Duterte's government. This observation is further supported by the fact that net trust ratings for the ABC class later aligned with the lower ratings of the other classes under the new Marcos Jr. administration, which adopted a more assertive stance toward Beijing. On the whole, net trust toward China among all socioeconomic classes continues to remain negative.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond Social Weather Survey public opinion polls, additional examples of diplomatic backlash reflect the Filipino masses' overall response to Chinese public diplomacy. For instance, after the 'Wow China' program received substantial flak from Filipino netizens in May 2020, opposition lawmakers criticized the PCOO for 'airing Chinese state propaganda in a government-owned radio station' instead of 'relevant and timely information' during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>70</sup> The particular episode received over 16,000 angry reactions on Facebook, with most criticisms targeting the paradox of the Philippine government broadcasting Chinese content while it continued to claim disputed waters.<sup>71</sup> The government-owned Philippine

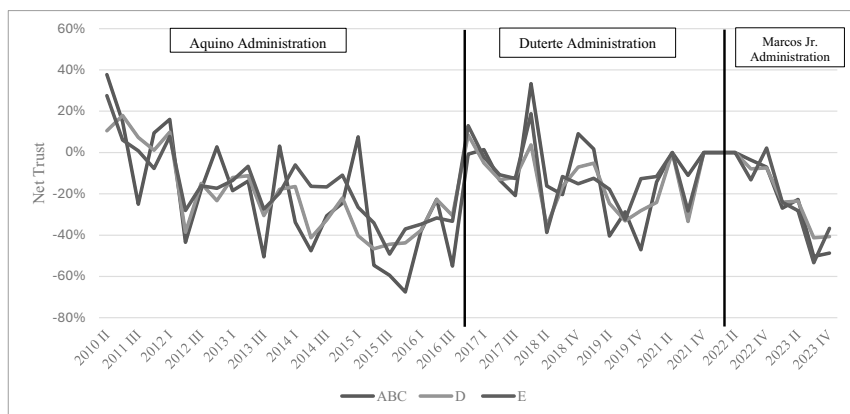


Figure 6.3 Philippines net trust in China by socioeconomic class, 2010–2023.

Source: Social Weather Survey Station.

Broadcasting Service defended 'Wow China' by referring to the program's format and content as 'light, informative, and entertaining' that does not 'espouse or promote a particular political view or cause.'<sup>72</sup> The strong social media backlash against Wow China in mid-2020 comes as a surprise since the program has been airing for two years. This incident represents how the program may have failed to attract a substantial following since its establishment in 2018.

In another similar instance, retired Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio, one of the country's most vocal advocates defending the PCA's 2016 ruling in the South China Sea/WPS, suggested shutting down CIs in the Philippines in retaliation against China's failure to acknowledge the PCA's decision.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Justice Carpio argued that CIs might propagate 'false stories about [the] nine-dash line' to its Filipino students, thereby undermining the merits of the PCA award.<sup>74</sup> Carpio's criticism emerged in the wake of another public diplomacy failure when China released a music video titled 'Isang Dagat' (One Sea). The Chinese embassy in the Philippines produced and dubbed the music video as a 'COVID-19 tribute' in light of China's pandemic-related assistance to the Philippines.<sup>75</sup> The Chinese ambassador composed the lyrics, and a combination of Chinese and Filipino singers, which included a Filipino vice governor, sang the song. Although intended to chronicle government-to-government cooperation in the Philippines' fight against COVID-19, the title 'One Sea' has struck a negative chord among Filipinos. Much of the negative comments, often expletive-laden, pointed out that the title 'One Sea' implied shared ownership over the WPS, thereby blatantly disregarding the legal ownership won by the Philippines over the contested territory.<sup>76</sup> For former DFA Secretary Albert Del Rosario, the Philippines must be wary of China taking advantage of everyone's preoccupation amidst the global pandemic as it continues 'to pursue its illegal and expansive claims in the South China Sea.'<sup>77</sup>

The previous Duterte administration's largely elite-driven embrace of Chinese public diplomacy clearly did not resonate with the Filipino masses. As such, public diplomacy efforts targeted toward the Filipino majority largely fell flat, which also never rebounded under the more assertive Marcos Jr. administration. Indeed, the space to expand Chinese public diplomacy remained limited under the current government. Much of China's public diplomacy efforts seem to have been diverted in trying to shape the narrative of heightened tensions in the South China Sea/WPS, especially as the current Marcos government has ramped up nationalist sentiments on the issue through its 'transparency initiative' aimed at highlighting China's incursions in Philippine territory.<sup>78</sup>

Other countries have also experienced a decline in views toward China in the past two years; thus, the trend in the Philippines may not be that unusual. However, the significant decrease in net trust among Filipinos toward China is noteworthy given China's large-scale efforts to expand public diplomacy outreach, especially under the previous government. Furthermore, Duterte's strong pro-China stance should have had an amplifying effect on Chinese public diplomacy efforts, but it didn't.<sup>79</sup> Even if Chinese assertiveness in the region, including actions in the South China Sea/WPS, has reified the Chinese threat narrative in the Indo-Pacific, the

popularity of former President Duterte and his positive views of China would not suggest a general trend toward *decreasing* public trust in China. So what explains the ineffectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy when measured by mass attitudes toward China?

### **WPS and the Construction of a Philippine Nationalist Narrative**

This section discusses further how Chinese incursions in the Philippine waters have elicited a strong nationalist response from Filipinos, reinforcing perceptions of China as untrustworthy and threatening. It also presents qualitative evidence demonstrating linkages between disputes in the South China Sea/WPS and Philippine national identity and addresses how domestic institutions and national identity, rather than security threats *per se*, undermine Chinese influence on the public diplomacy front.

#### ***Cultural-Historical Institutions***

Although several factors may dampen the effects of Chinese public diplomacy – including but not limited to rising China threat perceptions in the region – the overall pro-US bias of ordinary Filipinos, as well as cultural historical institutions such as nationalism, act as ‘channels through which China’s influence can accrue or dissipate.’<sup>80</sup> Filipino historical narratives stress the idea that Filipinos are, by nature, ‘people of the sea’ (*mandaragat*). Therefore, the South China Sea disputes, while clearly a security concern for the Philippines, actually challenge an integral part of Filipino national identity and their ‘ocean heritage.’<sup>81</sup>

In a widely disseminated primer on the WPS, the DFA begins its concise explanation with a story describing the early Filipino peoples as being highly dependent on the ocean for their livelihood.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, in official documents submitted to the PCA for ruling under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Philippine government emphasized the early experience of the peoples in the pre-colonial Philippines organized in ‘barangays,’ the earliest known political unit in Philippine history. This reiterated that Filipinos have historically been dependent on the South China Sea for trade and even extending tribute, reflecting their innate ‘maritime orientation.’<sup>83</sup>

The country’s Spanish colonial period provides even more solid documentary evidence of early Filipino claims to sovereignty over the WPS, which includes ‘the Luzon Sea, as well as the waters around, within, and adjacent to the Kalayaan island group, and Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal).’<sup>84</sup> Spanish maps of the Philippines dating as far back as 1734 refer to the Scarborough Shoal as *panacot* (meaning ‘to threaten’ in Tagalog) or *baxo de masinglo*.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, as reflected in its legal documentation to the PCA, the Philippines’ historical arguments recognize the shared historical experiences of different Asian peoples in the vast ocean, thereby delegitimizing any claims of exclusive historical ownership. As such, China carries ‘an important presence and interest in these waters, but only on an equal footing with the other coastal states, or their colonial

or pre-colonial predecessors.<sup>86</sup> By making this argument, the modern Philippine state officially recognizes the importance of its pre-colonial experience in the South China Sea. Such recognition is not just for the sake of building a strong legal argument over the WPS but also to shape the narrative of the Filipino past and its subsequent identity.

Asserting ownership over the WPS can be found in the nationalist rhetoric of the Filipino masses. At the height of the territorial disputes between the two countries during the Aquino administration (2010–2016), Filipino protesters often highlighted the sentiment that China is an ‘intruder’ in ‘our waters.’<sup>87</sup> Robert Arakaki’s media analysis of cyber discussions covering the dispute revealed various themes of ‘Us vs. Them’ in online Filipino nationalist discourses where ultimately, China is portrayed as a ‘bully’ taking over what rightfully belongs to Filipinos.<sup>88</sup>

Intrusion and occupation have been the default interpretation of any Chinese presence in the Philippines precisely because of a strong nationalist psyche rooted in the idea that the Philippine territories are being unjustly disputed. This creates a story that Filipinos are victimized by the ‘bully,’ further entrenching a narrative of trauma collectively employed to make sense of China’s engagement with the Philippines. Filipino nationalism, as it is being actively institutionalized in this case, affects the country’s receptivity to China’s public diplomacy. As one commentary has put it, there is currently a ‘creeping Chinese invasion’ in the Philippines, as can be observed in the sudden expansion of Chinese activities in various local industries such as property and offshore gaming.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, *Xinhua*’s inclusion of its ‘Many Facets of China’ section in the *Manila Bulletin* has been interpreted in Philippine social media as China’s ‘encroachment into our consciousness.’<sup>90</sup> Filipino legislators have also spoken against obtaining concessional loans from China in light of the latter’s reclamation activities in the WPS.<sup>91</sup>

### *Nationalist Discourse*

From 2011, both elite and mass discourse pertaining to the WPS reveals how conflict with China in the WPS evoked Philippine nationalism. It is crucial to keep in mind that the WPS is, in part, a social construction, built around claims of Philippine territorial sovereignty. Although the Philippine government had laid stake to disputed territories prior to 2011 with China, most notably over the Spratly Islands in 1995, the designation of the WPS over the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone provided Filipinos a stronger nationalist claim.

Despite President Duterte’s reluctance to criticize China on maritime disputes, the president has asserted nationalist claims over the WPS. For instance, in his final State of the Union address on July 26, 2021, Duterte asserted that the 2016 ‘Arbitral award is part of the international law, and beyond compromise and beyond the reach of the passing governments to dilute, to diminish, or abandon.’<sup>92</sup> During his presidential campaign, Duterte also warned the Chinese, ‘what you are occupying now belongs to the Republic of the Philippines.’<sup>93</sup> In addition, other high-ranking Filipino officials such as Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana also evoked the WPS in nationalist terms. Referring to Duterte’s conflict management

in the WPS, Lorenzana stated, 'Defending national sovereignty and protecting territorial integrity is a paramount priority of this administration.'<sup>94</sup> Similarly, former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario, speaking in front of a large gathering of Filipino youth, evoked nationalist claims regarding disputes in the WPS/SCS by proclaiming, 'This is a collective call for all Filipinos to unite as one. This is a call for you to be a patriot.'<sup>95</sup>

Beyond framing the WPS in nationalist terms, civil society actors have organized anti-China protests on symbolic dates, evoking Philippine national identity in response to Chinese incursions and claims to the WPS. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, civic groups held protests on Independence Day in the Philippines (June 12) to 'assert the country's sovereignty' in the WPS. Protests were held in Manila, Makati, Kawit in Cavite, Cebu City, and Iloilo.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, even with strict quarantine protocols in recent years brought about by the pandemic, anti-China protests continued to be held during Independence Day in front of the Chinese consulate in Manila.<sup>97</sup> Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), a left-wing nationalist organization, has also organized anti-China rallies following skirmishes involving Chinese vessels in the WPS. Bayan also led protests during state visits between President Xi and President Duterte with the aim of 'asserting the country's sovereignty over the disputed territory in the West Philippine Sea.'<sup>98</sup> Unsurprisingly, in public opinion polls, 73% of Filipinos in 2024 stated that they 'favor further asserting the Philippines' territorial rights through military action, such as expanded naval patrols and troop presence in the WPS.'<sup>99</sup>

In sum, by nationalizing maritime claims in the WPS and referring to its defense as a 'patriotic duty,' Filipinos have embraced a WPS-based nationalism that stigmatizes Chinese diplomatic overtures. Informational and cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges that advance Chinese soft power appear incongruent when framed against Chinese actions and claims in the WPS. Despite a significant increase in Chinese public diplomacy, ongoing disputes in the WPS have overshadowed and undermined Chinese efforts to influence the Philippine polity.

## Conclusion

A heightened sense of Philippine nationalism evoked by 'influence externalities' stemming from Chinese incursions in the WPS and Chinese-owned POGOs has made ordinary Filipinos relatively immune to China's public diplomacy outreach. Likewise, even though Chinese financial diplomacy and pro-China messaging from President Duterte may have softened elite attitudes toward China, strong public opinion against China has prevented the Philippine government from acquiescing to China on foreign policy issues or from shifting its stance toward the US–Philippine alliance. And given recent developments of recalibrating Philippine foreign policy under the new administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., China has encountered renewed difficulties in ensuring that its public diplomacy efforts in the Philippines bear fruit. Based on recent surveys, public sentiment toward China's overall influence continued to decline in the last four years.<sup>100</sup> This further underscores not just China's ineffective public diplomacy footprint in the Philippines,

but also how favorable governments prove ineffective in priming public perceptions to positively accommodate China's outreach.

Moreover, this chapter examined how cultural-institutional factors such as nationalism acted as a barrier to Chinese influence and public diplomacy. IR scholars will inevitably focus on Beijing's agency when assessing Chinese influence abroad, given its great power status and increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. However, this research demonstrates that domestic institutional factors also prevented the CCP from making deep political inroads within a given polity. Similarly, some may continue to view geopolitics – such as the territorial dispute in this case – as a straightforward explanation for the ineffectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy. However, the mechanisms at play, including active efforts to institutionalize and promote Filipino nationalism, actually complicate the dynamics of influence. Rather than radiating positive images of China, Chinese actions in the South China Sea/WPS, which fall more in line with its 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' rather than public (i.e., soft) diplomacy, have tended to capture the public imagination, thereby reinforcing China's image as an aggressor within the region.<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, the revitalization of the US–Philippine alliance under the Marcos Jr. administration signals a decisive pivot to the US in response to clear preferences to adopt an assertive position against China. Despite this shift, diplomatic engagements between China and the Philippines remain active, with ongoing communication primarily aimed at managing and de-escalating recurring tensions in the South China Sea/WPS. Amid heightened mutual mistrust at an all-time high, this situation presents Beijing with a renewed opportunity to recalibrate its public diplomacy strategy toward the Philippines.

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# 7 ‘Chinese Influence’ in Central and Eastern Europe?

## Diffusion of a Meme

*Anastas Vangeli and Richard Turcsányi*

### Introduction

Since about 2012, a casual observer of international affairs would have been exposed to some unprecedentedly strong language surrounding China’s relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Allegedly, China was dividing and conquering Europe.<sup>1</sup> It was said to be rebuilding the Iron Curtain in Europe and establishing a new Eastern bloc;<sup>2</sup> or buying up the fragile post-socialist democracies of Europe on the cheap, with its corrosive capital not just a threat to the European periphery, but to the West in general.<sup>3</sup> These are some of the interpretations which have appeared in international media in the years following the launch of the China–CEE Countries Cooperation Initiative in the early 2010s, called 16 + 1, 17 + 1, or 14+1 at different times.<sup>4</sup> All of these tropes boil down to the key point: CEE has allegedly become a prime example of China’s growing ‘malign influence’ internationally.<sup>5</sup>

‘Chinese influence,’ in this sense, resembles a meme that has spread among journalists, China watchers, security experts, and policymakers. Frequently, attempts at empirically backing the Chinese global ‘influence’ narratives pointed to CEE and have been significantly inspired by China’s relations with the region. Our goal in this chapter is thus to scrutinise ‘Chinese influence’ narratives by juxtaposing them against the reality of China–CEE relations. Specifically, we first show that the discourse has been largely factually misplaced before we move on to explain why it has spread, nonetheless. While acknowledging legitimate concerns about China’s foreign policy and its impact worldwide – including in the CEE region – we argue that the alarmist discourse on ‘Chinese influence’ and its application in CEE is exaggerated and counterproductive: it limits the ability to properly understand and analyse China’s foreign policy and its complex, multifaceted impacts – both in the material and ideational domains.

### The Rise of the ‘Chinese Influence’ Meme

Historically, ‘Chinese influence’ referred to processes of cultural and ideational outflows from China to the rest of the world, including Europe.<sup>6</sup> In the 2000s, it was assigned a (geo)political meaning, and was referred to in the analyses on China’s growing interactions within its neighbourhood and beyond, and was intertwined

with the study of China's soft power, and later on with its global impact in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.<sup>7</sup> Some of these works provided a conceptually refined toolkit to analyse the different forms that China's influence may take, accounting for the differences in goals, logic, dynamics, and outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

Independently from the scholarly inquiry into China's impact overseas, around 2016–2017 Anglophone think tanks and pundits started to increasingly talk about 'Chinese influence.'<sup>9</sup> This process can be studied through the lenses of securitisation, whereby the think tanks and pundits who produced and diffused the meme of 'Chinese influence' are considered securitising actors,<sup>10</sup> that have 'contextually mobilized' various 'heuristic artifacts' aimed at building 'a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability'<sup>11</sup> stemming from the exposure to malign Chinese influence. The aggregate, all-inclusive approach whereby distinctive activities pursued by Chinese actors were lumped under 'Chinese influence' aimed to alarm global audiences and elicit a response.<sup>12</sup> We argue that the securitising behaviour of the actors, which introduced the Chinese influence discourse into the global China-watching community, served as a critical point of infusion. The concept has been since adopted by others and evolved into a meme that has diffused organically and without centralised guidance. Despite varying interpretations and applications, alarmism has remained the meme's core and unifying factor. This organic, spontaneous process of meme diffusion and its ideational features are of primary interest to our chapter.

According to mimetic theories, memes are 'viral' ideas, 'leaping from brain to brain'<sup>13</sup> that have been central to the historical evolution of human cultures and societies,<sup>14</sup> and are central to the thinking and conduct of actors in global politics.<sup>15</sup> Memes have been an intrinsic part of the study of contemporary China. In the 2010s, the 'Chinese assertiveness' mimetic discourse was the dominant analytical device used to understand China's foreign policy behaviour in its neighbourhood and beyond.<sup>16</sup> Today, the 'Chinese influence' meme is accompanied by those of the so-called 'debt trap' diplomacy<sup>17</sup> and of China as a threat to the liberal 'rules-based order.'<sup>18</sup>

There are important insights that can be gathered from the diffusion of the 'assertiveness' meme, which are relevant for the study of the rise of the 'Chinese influence' meme. A number of studies found the 'assertiveness' discourse exaggerated and inaccurate; thus they examined why the meme had diffused quickly and successfully, despite obvious limitations.<sup>19</sup> They concluded that the 'assertiveness' meme diffused due to the combined effects of changes in the realm of global (power) politics and the associated strategic calculations and deployment of certain tropes, and the habitus of the 'China-watching' community which is poised to facilitate a more spontaneous and organic meme generation and diffusion.

Johnston pointed out the selection on the dependent variable, ahistoricity, and problematic causal links that plagued the discourse, perpetuated primarily by journalists and pundits. Jerden<sup>20</sup> pointed out that academics have been complicit as they over-relied on given information – without scrutinising it – provided through the 'information cascades' via their personal networks and social media; they had

a preference to explain the causes and consequences of the assumed assertiveness before analysing what is in fact going on; they failed to distinguish between discourse and policy outcomes; they embraced a 'folk realist' worldview in which it was axiomatic that a rising China will be more assertive; this was further supported by the deepening disillusionment with the idea that China will 'westernise;' all of this was boosted by the intertwined work of researchers, think tanks, and policy-makers, i.e. the Pivot to Asia.

These factors are present and determine the spread of the new memes about China today as well. With the boom of social media and in particular the 'say first, verify later' aphoristic communication style on social media, 'information cascades' are intensifying; thus, any instance of alleged Chinese influence spreads among a massive audience instantly;<sup>21</sup> authors go to great lengths to explain causes and consequences of assumed influence without proper conceptualisation and operationalisation; they perpetuate 'discursive determinism' by focusing on statements rather than actions and outcomes; 'folk realism' endures and so do assumptions of a new great power competition;<sup>22</sup> disillusionment with the engagement paradigm and promotion of Western influence in China leads to fears of a reverse tide coming from China; while research is highly politicised.

### **'Chinese influence' in CEE: Discourse and Reality**

CEE is a region structurally positioned in between the developed and developing worlds.<sup>23</sup> CEE has been at the forefront of most European conflicts and divisions in modern history. Most recently, during the Cold War, it formed the Western border of the Soviet sphere of influence (with Yugoslavia notably being non-aligned,<sup>24</sup> and countries like Romania and Albania also pursuing an independent course), while today all of the CEE countries are either EU member states or candidates for membership in the EU; most of them, except Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are NATO countries, too. The CEE countries form the Eastern border of these integration groups. After 2022, the Russia–Ukraine war, however, has brought new uncertainties to the region, solidifying its position as a borderline of the geopolitical West.

China's role in CEE was insignificant in the two decades following the collapse of communism in CEE in 1989, yet after the 2008 global financial crisis it appeared on its doorstep as a potential new investor and trading partner.<sup>25</sup> After initially convening CEE economic ministers in Budapest in 2011, in 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met prime ministers of the 16 CEE countries in Warsaw and the format developed into what came to be known as the China–CEE Countries Cooperation Initiative, or 16 + 1 platform (it expanded to 17 + 1 with the inclusion of Greece in 2019, and de facto reduced to 14 + 1 in the 2020s).<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, prime ministers met annually, while dynamic exchanges in a number of fields followed involving businesses, regional governments, cities, cultural and educational representatives, and myriad other activities.<sup>27</sup> The platform gradually attracted international attention, for the CEE countries did not engage in a similarly active project with any other partner with the exception of the EU and NATO.

The ‘Chinese influence’ memes on CEE that followed in the subsequent years perpetuated an image that China’s influence is based on three pillars: 1) economic dominance, 2) political persuasion of the governments of the CEE countries and even conversion of their strategic direction, and 3) capturing the hearts and minds of the CEE public. Below we argue that all of them have been empirically and conceptually thin. We then move on to explain why, despite such shortcomings, the CEE region has become one of the prime examples of the ‘Chinese influence’ meme. We show that in all of these domains, what is often taken as evidence of Chinese influence, is in fact a mirroring reflection of internal insecurities in the West, one of the defining features of China–Europe, but also China–US relations.<sup>28</sup> Finally, we propose that by focusing too much on the elusive ‘influence,’ the debate has missed the complex, multifaceted ideational *impacts* by China on the region, which nonetheless, cannot be captured by the framework of ‘Chinese influence.’

### *Economy: Source of Power to Exert Influence?*

One of the earliest yet still persisting beliefs of ‘Chinese influence’ in the CEE region relates to the allegedly high level of economic leverage China has built in the region. Chinese media have often talked up the importance of Chinese investments and trade,<sup>29</sup> arguably as a way to paint the China–CEE Countries Cooperation platform as a success story, while at the same time attempting to get a spot for China among the consequential players in regional affairs.<sup>30</sup> Many CEE officials, at least initially into the platform development, reciprocated these rosy descriptions probably fuelled by the hope of future prospects, although with time going and with few visible economic outcomes, a sense of discontent started to take over in most countries of the region.<sup>31</sup> By the mid 2020s, toned-down enthusiasm about China in the region remains, but it is past the peak of the 2012–2017 period. By 2025, several CEE countries had called out the expectations-to-delivery discrepancy (most visible at the 2021 online summit chaired by Xi Jinping which had the lowest representation), while Lithuania (later joined also by Latvia and Estonia) announced that it is suspending participation in the platform citing lack of economic results among the reasons.<sup>32</sup> China has also scaled back its interest in regional cooperation with CEE, as the platform itself has been seemingly put on hold, with no leaders’ summit taking place since the online meeting in 2021, although lower-level exchanges continue to operate, maintaining a lower profile.

Nevertheless, many Western European and US observers had taken the flowery official narratives of China–CEE at face value. Already before the summit in Bucharest in 2013, then EU’s Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht grudgingly reminded EU members within the group to ‘respect the general EU line and collective policies.’<sup>33</sup> *Forbes* ran a spectacular story claiming that China intends to ‘buy Eastern Europe on the Cheap’ and similar stories appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Deutsche Welle*, or *South China Morning Post*.<sup>34</sup> Even though a number of observers argued against such ‘hype,’<sup>35</sup> the idea persisted. In 2020, former US Assistant Secretary of State, A. Wess Mitchell, still claimed that Central

Europe is 'in bed with Beijing',<sup>36</sup> as he toured the region to warn of China's malign influence.

The assumption of impending economic domination has been central to the 'Chinese influence' memes in CEE. In reality, however, the economic leverage of China in the CEE region is limited. The share of China in the CEE countries' exports is about 1 to 2%,<sup>37</sup> generally smaller than for most other European countries, and especially countries from Western Europe. In terms of Chinese foreign direct investments,<sup>38</sup> there are significant discrepancies between countries, but overall Chinese capital makes up 1 to 2% of overall Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock in most CEE countries, with only exceptions between Greece (6%) and Hungary (3%), which rank among the EU members with the highest share of Chinese investments in their overall FDI share.<sup>39</sup> Chinese-tied loans projects are significant in the Western Balkans; nevertheless, even in their context, China is only considered a 'Plan B' option, as a strong preference for Western partners remains.<sup>40</sup> In countries which have experienced significant financial sustainability issues regarding Chinese loans, such as Montenegro, the 'Chinese influence' meme is paired with the 'debt trap' one.<sup>41</sup> However, in these countries, Chinese loans are not the major financial issues that would grant China unprecedented leverage and influence (e.g. the debt owed to China is approximately 20% of the total Montenegrin national external debt).<sup>42</sup>

What can be considered a source of symbolic power for China, however, is not its economic might *per se*, but rather the compelling narrative of its economic miracle, and the appeal of the geoeconomic imagination underpinning its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>43</sup> The geoeconomic narrative, rather than the economic leverage, is what has made China distinctive from other global actors – and it is still something that other actors try to emulate (e.g. the EU through the 'Global Gateway' or the US through the G7-led 'Partnerships for Global Investment in Infrastructure'). Nevertheless, the potential of the economic narrative to be converted into tangible impact and influence is conditioned by actual economic deliverables – which, as argued, have so far not met the subjective expectations (or the fears) of most CEE actors and concerned observers.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, China's practices of state-led development had in fact had an impact on changing paradigms of economic development in CEE and in Europe as a whole – but in many ways, this was an unintended ideational consequence of and a backlash against China's policies, as many in Europe had embraced a more centralised, state-led vision of development in order to compete rather than cooperate with China.<sup>45</sup> By 2025, leading European voices had even suggested that Europe builds on Deng Xiaoping's playbook in attracting Chinese investment in advanced technologies where Chinese companies seemingly have an edge, such as electric vehicles.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Politics: Achieving Strategic Goals?***

Beyond economics, much of the discussion surrounding 'Chinese influence' ends up listing what China is doing – or even just trying to do – without providing systematic evidence of the results.<sup>47</sup> Yet, when authors did study China's achievements



in the region, they found that there are little to no indications that China's intended outcomes – which have been to build closer and more aligned relations with the region and which are quite modest compared to the alarmist account of 'dividing and conquering' – have materialised. In terms of China's impact on the CEE countries' political actions, Matura<sup>48</sup> empirically tests for correlation between the level of trade with China and Chinese investments in the CEE countries on the one hand, and their voting behaviour in the Council of the EU on the other, showing that until 2015, no such pattern exists. Another study has tested whether the CEE countries adopt pro-China voting or discursive patterns in the UN General Assembly, finding no evidence of such shifts for all CEE countries except Serbia.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, contrary to the mainstream narratives, some CEE countries have become some of Europe's most vocal critics of engaging China.<sup>50</sup> Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic were among the first EU countries to effectively block Chinese vendors from the 5G networks. Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland are also among the most active EU members when it comes to developing relations with Taiwan and pushing the limits of what China would accept in this regard.<sup>51</sup> Especially since the start of Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many in the CEE region problematised the mainstream EU strategy of engaging China, citing the close partnership between China and Russia.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, some individual actors and states in CEE have taken friendly postures vis-à-vis China. Indeed, it was these individual cases which have then served as anecdotal evidence of 'Chinese influence' in the CEE region where allegedly China has influenced a certain country (mostly Hungary, Serbia, or Greece, but also the Czech Republic) to take a position favourable to China. However, when looking closer at individual cases and analysing their context, it becomes more likely that events casually presented as 'Chinese influence' are actually independent actions of local actors deciding in their own interest to take positions which also happened to be favoured by China, or using the relationship with China to maximise their own positions. This is in line with what Fung et al. discussed as the conditioning role of the domestic *institutions*<sup>53</sup> – essentially highlighting the agency of the CEE actors as prime reasons for taking certain China-friendly policies, rather than being the effect of China's influence.

In Hungary, the Prime Minister Orban has been, for a long time, in a political struggle with the EU, which has criticised him for his authoritarian tendencies and misappropriation of EU funds. Orban himself has responded with his own criticism of the policies favoured by the EU, while at the same time rhetorically presenting China as a political and economic alternative, and even a role model.<sup>54</sup>

In Serbia, President Vucic has been the driving force behind his country's China-friendly positions and his motivation may well be similar to Orban's: while nominally attempting to enter the EU, Vucic leans on China politically and economically to signal to Brussels that 'it is not the only game in town' and hence attempts to increase his leverage. Leaders in Montenegro and North Macedonia have also attempted to leverage their relationships with China to add urgency to their own EU accession bids.<sup>55</sup>

In Greece, as a result of a sovereign debt crisis and the pressure of the EU and international institutions, public opinion and the government have been willing to engage in cooperation with China as a way to offset the economic and political pressure. The landmark Piraeus port privatisation and purchase by COSCO was a result of the austerity measures undertaken in the wake of the sovereign debt crisis, and a last-resort move by the Greek government.

In the Czech Republic, President Zeman was the main figure behind the country's 'U-turn' towards the China-friendly positions after 2012. Zeman has visited China more than any other country, including the first two Belt and Road Initiative Forums and the 2015 military parade in Beijing – as the only EU head of state to do so.<sup>56</sup> Zeman's actions and comments can be best interpreted as a way of symbolically fighting with the liberal pro-Western opposition at home, while also economically benefiting his cronies.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, often when referring to cases of closer relations between China and CEE, rather than 'Chinese influence,' or as some authors have recently claimed 'demand-driven influence',<sup>58</sup> a more appropriate concept would be using China to advance one's own interests. China is effectively used as an inspiration to 'extend' the geopolitical and geoeconomic imaginaries, i.e. China's symbolic power has, not necessarily intentionally, helped create a sense of multiplication of options, possibilities, and preferences.<sup>59</sup> However, while a form of ideational impact, this is distinctive from what is assumed to be 'Chinese influence:' it is a result of two-way communication and open-ended in nature, and not an automatic fulfilment of Chinese strategic objectives; it is conditioned by global material and ideational shifts, and liminal in nature. This point also helps 'complicate' the notion of intentionality in China–CEE relations: while the outcomes of the relationship are hardly in accord with what Chinese policymakers (may have) originally desired, there certainly have been a variety of unintended outcomes, both in favour of and against Chinese interests in the region. A more decisive variable in this process has been the agency and the political entrepreneurship of CEE leaders.

### ***Public Attitudes: Winning Hearts and Minds?***

Another common theme in commentaries on 'Chinese influence' is that China captures public discourses in CEE, making public attitudes more China-friendly. This is often linked to the rise of disruptive political ideas (dubbed illiberalism, populism, or simply Euroscepticism), which have proliferated in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in CEE (and well beyond it) and have been seen with great concern by observers, and assumed to go hand in hand with rising 'Chinese influence.' However, this has not been the case.

Overall, in most of the CEE countries, publics and opinion shapers in the region remain disenchanted with China. Karaskova et al.<sup>60</sup> in their study of media in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary argue that one minor media outlet in the Czech Republic changed its reporting of China after it was purchased by a Chinese investor. However, no further evidence of the media becoming more China-friendly was found even throughout the dynamic years of China–CEE Countries

Cooperation before 2017.<sup>61</sup> A significant deviation from this trend, however, can be observed in the Western Balkans, where on average China enjoys greater trust than in the rest of CEE and Europe, although, aside from Serbia, and without going into variation along ethnic lines, the Balkan publics are still predominantly Western-oriented.<sup>62</sup>

A Sinophone Borderlands survey collected data in 13 European countries and also included 6 CEE countries cooperating with China (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Latvia, and Serbia).<sup>63</sup> Confirming the Balkan exception, only the public in Serbia turned out to be decisively positive about China, favouring it over the Western partners, which reflects a traditional preference for multipolarity and historic grievances due to the 1999 NATO military intervention. The remaining countries had negative attitudes towards China, roughly at the level of Spain or Italy, and only slightly less negative than the Western European countries (Sweden, Germany, UK, and France). Moreover, while the Latvian public had a relatively positive view of China, it was also one of the staunchest supporters of an EU-oriented foreign policy agenda. Aside from media and public opinion, there has been other evidence of significant distance from China – including protests and negative perceptions towards China during COVID-19, and mistrust during the Russia–Ukraine War. Once again, the outcomes are better explained as a mixed bag of predominantly unintended consequences, if evaluated against the original position of Chinese policymakers.

### **Beyond ‘Influence’: Why the Meme Spread?**

As argued above, China likely had more modest ambitions in CEE than projected onto it, while it has not managed to establish an economic leverage, nor has it achieved a significant observable shift in the international attitudes of the CEE governments and the publics that can indicate a successful influence outcome. In reality, often some important regional features – economic desires, political manoeuvrings, and dissatisfaction with globalisation to name a few – were misdiagnosed as Chinese influence, while unintended consequences, both in favour of and against China’s agenda, have been ignored. The question is then how, despite this uneventful reality, has CEE become one of the emblems of the ‘Chinese influence’ mimetic discourse? We suggest three main groups of reasons specific to the China–CEE relations which have contributed to why this region has become so prominent within the ‘Chinese influence’ discourse.

#### ***Double Othering***

The ‘Chinese influence’ discourse – both globally and with reference to CEE – rests on the suspicion that China is a malicious global actor not for ‘what it does, but for what it is.’<sup>64</sup> As an authoritarian *Other*, China is perceived as oriented at subverting Western liberal democracy and ‘exporting’ its model, which is assumed to be the defining characteristic of its influence pursuits. This is why the ‘influence’

discourse adopts an all-inclusive, aggregate approach – all areas of interaction with China are seen as potentially spreading authoritarianism. This often prevents understanding China's actual interests and intentions, and the consequences of its interactions overseas.

An important contributing factor to this is that endeavours such as the China–CEE platform are results of China's proactivity: it was China who initiated closer relationships with this region and it has remained in the driving seat. Thus, while many of the activities under the China–CEE platform have not helped achieve China's desired goals, since China is not a liberal democracy, it is assumed that its increasing presence and activity are inherently malign, while the mere increased presence is considered a significant success.

The Othering of China is accompanied by the Othering of CEE as well. In this sense, the problem has not been just China but also China's accomplices (the CEE countries). Historically, CEE has been perceived as the 'less European' part of Europe compared to the core countries in Western Europe, which was further strengthened by the Cold War. The 'Europeanisation' of CEE was thus the EU's strategic objective in the region after the fall of socialism in Europe. Receiving substantial investments and institutional support, CEE has been historically meant to be an example of Europe's transformative power. Nevertheless, regardless of economic development, CEE has remained 'dependent capitalist' and has over time seen a process of democratic backsliding and rise of illiberalism, while also clashing with the EU on a range of issues. Even geostrategically, CEE has had differences with the EU, e.g. as it emerged as supportive of the US agenda during the War on Terror, when 'core' Europe was firmly against it.<sup>65</sup> The CEE is thus seen as a soft spot, weak link, underbelly, or backyard, which China trespasses – and a region that cannot be fully trusted or relied upon.

CEE is indeed an economically less developed and politically less prominent part of Europe, easily overshadowed by China in any comparison. Some CEE actors are illiberal and are open to alternative ideas and models. Others are politically entrepreneurial and look for different opportunities to improve their geopolitical standing and hedge their bets. Many of them welcome or even demand closer cooperation with China driven by their own interests.<sup>66</sup> However, notwithstanding all these factors, as argued throughout this paper, CEE remains far from an easy terrain to navigate for Chinese actors. What the 'influence' discourse overlooks is the complex architecture and agency of both China and CEE.

### *Assuming Monolithic China*

The portrayal of China as an authoritarian behemoth under the 'Chinese influence' framework has been accompanied by a tendency to present China as a monolithic, collective actor, despite the established knowledge of the processes of fragmentation that, alongside the top-down dynamics, are dialectically co-shaping China's policy landscape.<sup>67</sup> Even when the 'influence' discourse acknowledges the plurality of actors that exist in the Chinese foreign policy field, they are still treated as

appendages directly controlled by the centre. We, however, posit that the plurality of actors – or, as Fung et al. put it ‘intermediaries’ – is central to understanding both the development of China–CEE, and its consequences.

While centralisation processes in China under Xi Jinping have been notable, the centralisation-fragmentation dynamics remain a significant element of China’s foreign policy.<sup>68</sup> Actors from all policy sectors, at the various levels of the Chinese administration, play a significant role in the development of China’s new, proactive foreign policy and initiatives, and as such are major shapers of China–CEE relations. The central government and the top leadership have provided a loose framework for action, which has then been picked up by these different actors, aligned with their own priorities, and translated into action based on their own resources and potentials, noting varying degrees of success. Together, they form a complex and diversified picture of China–CEE relations, which approximates a loose assemblage of markedly different lower-level relationships rather than a single, uniform and centrally coordinated design.

For example, sub-national governments play a significant role in China’s foreign policy, including in developing the relations with CEE. The provincial government of Sichuan, the municipal administration of Chongqing, and the city administration of Ningbo are exceptionally active actors, driven by the competitive spirit that characterises the inter-provincial relations within China. They developed substantial relationships with their partners in CEE, including the Sichuan and Chongqing partnership with the Lodzkie region in Poland, and Ningbo’s organisation of the China–CEE Expo and associated networks and events.<sup>69</sup>

Chinese SOEs are also important actors in the CEE region. Rather than being just instruments of the central government, they pursue their own commercial interests and strategies, fiercely competing with other Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). For example, in North Macedonia, the Chinese SOE Sinohydro won lucrative contracts to construct two highway projects only after it successfully lobbied (and potentially engaged in corruption) to remove China Water & Electric Corporation from the competition.<sup>70</sup> China Road and Bridge Corporation, involved in projects in multiple Balkan countries, has a firm business logic in keeping and expanding its regional presence, as the costs of removing the heavy machinery and the ample workforce it has brought to the region are too high.<sup>71</sup>

Chinese private companies are the other important Chinese actors present in CEE. The most significant example is that of CEFC corporation. As it expanded globally, CEFC established a significant presence in the Czech Republic and developed close connections with parts of the Czech political elite. Nevertheless, CEFC’s presence in the Czech Republic (and other countries around the world) has been marred by corruption controversies, while the company’s reputation in China has also suffered, and ultimately, its top figures were arrested on corruption charges, while rumours of involvement in power struggles have also emerged. As Garlick<sup>72</sup> has shown, a substantial conflict of interest between the CEFC and the Chinese state led to a massive fall-out, which he describes as a principal-agent problem.

***Assuming Monolithic and Decontextualized CEE***

In addition to assuming the monolithic character of China, the 'Chinese influence' discourse often assumes the monolithic character of CEE as a region, as well as the monolithic character of individual CEE countries. While CEE countries share significant similarities (e.g. aside from Greece, they are all post-socialist countries; together with Greece, they are all dependent capitalist economies), the differences between them (and within them) have also shaped the relations with China. These actors have also been intermediaries whose role is central in understanding China's impacts in the region.

Most importantly, as was already suggested, rather than sharing similar patterns in their approach towards China, the CEE countries have substantially diverged, making it challenging to formulate a truly regional assessment. This is best visible when reviewing the China–CEE relations in 2024. Serbia and Hungary remain enthusiastic about engaging China, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The three Baltic countries have publicly announced that they were leaving the platform (effectively making it a 14 + 1 platform, down from 17 + 1 in 2019). The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland have seen a spike in critical debate on China and have become known as the strongest proponents of developing relations with Taiwan, although the most recent political changes in Slovakia, resulting from the parliamentary elections in 2023 and presidential election in 2024, make the country again more interested in engaging China economically.

The Czech Republic, in particular, is a telling example of the diversity of domestic actors: the changes in the Czech approach towards China have been largely a result of domestic political reshuffling, when all actors previously responsible for engaging China at various political levels were voted out of office between 2018 and 2022. For Poland, and also Romania and others, growing tensions between China and the US increased the costs of preserving an overly friendly posture toward China. Greece, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania remain 'strategically silent' – not investing much effort into building relations with China, but also not closing the door entirely.

Finally, the discourse on 'Chinese influence' overlooks the multifaceted global context in which China reaches out to the world. The 'Chinese influence' discourse overlooks how global political dynamics and actions by other actors, such as the EU and the US, shape the development of China–CEE relations. The EU continues to be a significant force in the region, with CEE countries generally adhering to EU rules in their dealings with China. The US's structural power influences the region even more significantly, as seen in the rejection of Chinese involvement in 5G networks by most CEE countries. Further complications have arisen due to the Russia–Ukraine war and China's perceived tacit support for Russia, further straining China–CEE relations and reflecting the complex context in which these interactions occur. Finally, as argued above, in CEE populist and illiberal trends are often assumed to be somehow linked to 'Chinese influence' – even though, in reality, they have been more substantially linked to the rise of similar trends in Western Europe and the US, and sometimes even winding up to be critical of

China (e.g. Poland under PiS). Moreover, ‘modest signs of convergence’<sup>73</sup> between some CEE countries (and in general, the EU) in terms of their approach to economic development through industrial policies and protectionism, are not a result of Chinese influence, but rather of the impact of China emerging as a consequential global actor. Simply, CEE – like other actors – adapts to a new reality. This could be studied through the lenses of ideational learning, translation, or diffusion with pronounced local agency as a driver<sup>74</sup> or the subject of study of the ideational impacts of the rise of China<sup>75</sup> – but the ‘Chinese influence’ framework does not do justice to it.

### Concluding Remarks

In line with what Fung et al.<sup>76</sup> discuss under their concepts of *intentionality*, *intermediaries*, and *institutions*, what is often simplified as ‘Chinese influence’ in the assumed-to-be monolithic CEE is *not* a one-dimensional product intentionally projected by a unified ‘China.’ Instead, it is a dynamic inter-negotiated process between a diverse network of actors both in China as well as in individual CEE countries, all following their own interests. Although the CEE region has been discussed repeatedly as a typical example of a region being ‘influenced’ by China, we have shown that China lacks the necessary leverage, while there is also no evidence that China has achieved its intentions in the region. Furthermore, any advancements of China–CEE relations can be better explained as a result of the agency of the CEE actors positioning themselves within the domestic or European or the global context, rather than acting as ‘proxies’ of China. However, by cherry-picking anecdotal evidence, committing a ‘double Othering’ of both China and CEE, and assuming that China and CEE are monolithic actors, the ‘Chinese influence’ discourse has managed to overlook the significant complexities that accompany China–CEE relations, sensationalising them as a poster-case of the ‘influence’ meme.

This is not to discredit the work of those whom we have critically engaged with; they have gathered important data points which can help add important pieces to the puzzle of the workings and impacts of Global China. However, we posit that the disproportionate attention, exaggerated conclusions, and the perpetuation of the ‘influence’ trope have limited potential to help us understand a number of challenges stemming from China’s global rise. Most importantly, changes in thinking and practice inspired by China should not be labelled as ‘influence’ – at least not influence which is intentional.

In this sense, this chapter does send a normative message, but this is not a message that aims to portray China in a more favourable light, nor to advocate a utopianist approach toward studying and dealing with it globally. However, it does suggest that a more sophisticated and self-assured approach is necessary, as alarmism and anxiety are not helpful for effectively navigating interactions with China on a global scale. The main point of the paper concerns the way we conceptualise and research China’s growing interactions with the world. The ‘influence’ agenda, as such, needs significant improvements. Perhaps a focus on *open-ended*

*impacts*, that capture both intended and unintended consequences of the myriad of Chinese actors with their counterparts worldwide, in their proper institutional and societal context, against the backdrop of an increasingly complex and uncertain global and local landscapes, is a much more worthwhile approach. These impacts can have different nature, intensity, and most importantly, concern different stakeholders – and by looking at their different perspectives, one can avoid the risk of assuming one-sided, simplified positions that are all too tempting to take in the current geopolitical setting. Such an approach can also establish a good foundation for studying the future development of China–CEE relations, which are likely to be as complex, multifaceted and dynamic, and challenging for scholars, as they have been in the recent past. After all, in the second term of US President Donald Trump, closer relations between EU and China, and conversely, between CEE and China are possible – but this would, again, not be a result of 'Chinese influence.'

## Notes

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## 8 Technical Standardization— A Power Source for Rising China?<sup>1</sup>

*Tim Nicholas Rühlig*

Considering the emerging competition over high technology between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), observers on both sides of the Pacific have identified technical standardization as an arena of this growing rivalry. For then-US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, setting international technological standards in closer cooperation with allies is a means to expand US strategic influence.<sup>2</sup> The Biden Administration's standardization strategy further argues that "Strength in standards development has been instrumental to the US' global technological leadership. Standards development underpins economic prosperity across the country and fortifies US leadership in the industries of the future at the same time. Bolstering US engagement in standards for critical and emerging technology spaces will strengthen US economic and national security."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for China, setting the technological rules, including on technical standards, is explicitly integrated into political ambitions to shape international affairs.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, for example, Shu Yinbiao, a leading Chinese technical standardization official, argued that the ability to shape international technical standard-setting is a reflection of a nation's power and competitiveness.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, technical standardization has been an integral part of macroeconomic planning in the PRC for quite some time.<sup>6</sup> China's 14th Five-Year Plan names strength in international standard-setting a target and refers to it in a wide range of sections.<sup>7</sup> Academics, media, and think tanks in both countries as well as in the European Union (EU) regard technical standardization as part of the emerging power competition over high technology.<sup>8</sup> This perspective on technical standards is based on three assumptions that are hardly ever examined although they are not a given:

*First*, US, Chinese, and European observers assume that the ability to shape technical standards translates into broader international influence. To those familiar with technical standard-setting, this is counterintuitive. Technical standards are omnipresent but *voluntary* product specifications that generate basic safety and interoperability. They are either the result of market dominance (*de facto* standards) or developed by standard developing organizations (SDOs) that overwhelmingly consist of representatives of private industry. While public actors do play a (minor) role, technical standardization is largely an example of private self-regulation. In contrast to intellectual property rights and patents, a good standard is available and accepted globally.<sup>9</sup> Where technical standards consist of patented technologies, we speak of standard-essential patents (SEPs); patent holders are obliged to license

their patents under fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory (FRAND) terms. Courts around the globe are enforcing FRAND terms on patent holders. Hence, technical standards apply a very different logic than, for example, export controls or punitive tariffs that aim to exclude competitors from supply or hinder market access. In the emerging technological competition, the US and China primarily use such measures. This raises the question of why technical standards should be available to the exclusionary logic that underlies the emerging technology competition.

Similarly, the political impact is also not obvious from the technical nature of these standards. USB is a standard for cables, connectors, and protocols that enables charging and the exchange of data on a wide range of devices. Similarly, Wi-Fi is a family of radio technologies built on technical standards that allow for wireless local area networking (WLAN) of a wide range of technological equipment. Technical standards allow products of all kinds to be applicable in a wide range of contexts across countries and manufacturers. Hence, technical standards are highly specific technological product specifications, developed by private industry, and accessible to everyone. *Why does it politically matter where the entities are located that have developed technical solutions underlying international standards in the first place?*

*Second*, the debate on technical standards as part of the emerging competition over high technology takes for granted that China possesses increasing impact on standard-setting. However, if one reviews the debate, very different and selective measures of such influence are provided. *Is the observation of a growing Chinese footprint<sup>10</sup> in international technical standardization accurate?*

*Third*, in the West, China's growing "standardization power" is mostly discussed in an alarming tone.<sup>11</sup> Not least historical analogies are introduced to argue that standard-setting can have a devastating impact if great powers ignore growing engagement by rising powers.<sup>12</sup> However, the lack of a clear concept of "standardization power" hinders observers from being clear about the inherent risks. *What are the consequences of China's growing footprint in technical standardization?*

The study of China's standardization influence also reflects the three "Is" – intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions – reflected upon in the introduction of this volume. The Chinese party-state is approaching technical standard-setting from a strategic angle. Since the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party has issued a detailed National Standardization Outline, it is hard to deny the *intentionality* of China's approach. Strikingly, this blunt political intentionality might change international standardization practices that – though they have always been political – have functioned on the illusion of being non-political. There is little, if any, evidence that this Chinese influence externality on the very nature of technical standardization is intended by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Hence, despite all political intentions, China's standardization efforts may very well have unintended consequences. It is also anything but a given that the Chinese leadership always understands the political implications of international standards that Chinese actors are shaping.

This points to the importance of Chinese *intermediaries*. Party-state institutions have a steering function, but state control over standard-setting has decreased.

The agency of private- and state-owned companies and research institutions – not least based on their respective technical expertise – is undeniable. In fact, only the strengthened role of private sector actors, though one can always question the degree to which such actors are independent of the party-state, has enabled the PRC to gain influence in technical standard-setting after the reform in 2018.

China standardization influence finally is also shaped by *institutions*. This holds both in the domestic and the international context. China's domestic state-steered standardization system has made the PRC favor state-centric international standardization practices. Strikingly, China is more influential in state-centric institutions. This points to the relevance of external and international institutions for China's influence. For example, Europe is rather resilient to Chinese standardization influence. The hierarchically structured standardization institutions that invalidate standards that conflict with national technical norms and highly regulate national standard bodies and European standardization organizations make the influx of Chinese standards difficult. Countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a less resilient institutional structure are likelier to incorporate Chinese standards. Equally, at the international level, the success of Chinese standardization efforts largely depends on the governance structure of the respective institution.

This chapter addresses the three questions outlined above one-by-one in the following three sections before reflecting on its implications for the “three Is.” First, contours of a conceptualization of “standardization power” differentiating four dimensions of such power are outlined. Next, the chapter discusses seven proxies measuring China's ability to shape international standard-setting. Finally, it develops three sets of risks that spell out in economic, legal, political, and ideational terms. The paper agrees with the widespread understanding that technical standardization turns into a subject of power rivalry over high technology but aims to substantiate this claim. This is not to say that China's standardization approach fundamentally deviates from that of the West under all circumstances. As argued elsewhere, the PRC has learned from Western approaches, adapted lessons learned to the characteristics of its party-state permeated economy, and is now externalizing this “Chinese variant” of standard-setting.<sup>13</sup> The paper ends with reflections on the impact of the “three Is”: Intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions.

### **The Concept of “Standardization Power”**

The ability to shape international technical standards is often associated with wider international influence. This section substantiates this assumption by developing a four-dimensional heuristic of standardization power defined as influence in international relations by means of shaping international technical standards. I differentiate between economic, legal, political, and ideational dimensions.

*Economic dimension:* Technical standards have distributary effects. This is the result of a high share of technical standards consisting of patented technology. In the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) standards, an estimate of 55% is patented.<sup>14</sup> As briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter,

patents and technical standards have contrary purposes. Technical standards follow an inclusive logic because they help spread technological solutions across manufacturers to establish interoperability and guarantee basic safety. In contrast, patents protect inventions and exclude competitors from using them. When technical standards consist of patented technology, this contradiction is resolved through licensing. When patent holders declare SEPs, they commit to licensing on FRAND terms. FRAND might sound utilitarian, but this is misleading. SEPs are available to all in return for potentially enormous royalty fees that manufacturers must pay to SEP holders. The Swedish technology company, Ericsson, for example, earned €5.2 billion by licensing technology in 2017, accounting for more than 20% of the company's revenue.<sup>15</sup> In other economic sectors beyond ICT, lower levels of royalties are common.

The distributary effects of technical standards are not limited to the payment of royalties for SEPs. Often, companies that fail to establish their technological solutions as technical standards need to redesign their products to comply with standards and thereby generate interoperability. Hence, those successfully setting international technical standards cannot only expect royalties but also avoid adaption costs. Given the considerable size of these distributary effects, technical standards affect competitiveness. This made Werner von Siemens argue already in the late-19th century that "he who owns the standards, owns the market."<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, successfully setting technical standards of key-enabling technologies will shape national economic competitiveness. A competitive industry in strategic sectors can only be beneficial to the host state. In China, more specifically, party-state influence over strategic sectors makes it even easier to leverage industry strength for political purposes.<sup>17</sup>

*Legal dimension:* De jure, international technical standards are voluntary technical specifications. Nonetheless, standards can unfold enormous legal force. The Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, the Agreement on Government Procurement, the review of the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) all treat international standards as benchmarks for the facilitation of international trade. Standards serve as important qualifications of what accounts as a legitimate exception, for example, under the pretext of basic safety requirements.<sup>18</sup> Article VI: 5b GATS, for instance, stipulates that international standards of relevant international organizations serve as yardsticks to ensure that trade in services is not more burdensome than necessary.<sup>19</sup> If domestic technical standards deviate from international ones, in principle, the judiciary of the WTO could find a state to be noncompliant with international trade law unless the respondent can provide a reasonable explanation for such deviation. This could be specific national circumstances necessary to protect human health and safety or the environment. Crucially, roughly 80% of international trade is affected by technical standards and associated technical regulations.<sup>20</sup> Hence, such provisions unfold a rather broad force.

Furthermore, domestic technical standards can unfold extraterritorial effects. States reference technical standards in legally binding documents, mostly in

regulations. When regulations prescribe thresholds, technical standards can serve as a suggested method for upholding the limits set in a regulation. In other words, if a referenced standard is applied, the respective product is assumed to be in conformity with the regulation. Companies seeking market access do not need to comply with the technical standard. Often, however, it is the easiest and cheapest option to implement the technical standard. When standards are referenced in the regulations of major markets such as the European Single Market, the US, or the PRC, they can unfold extraterritorial effects because multinational companies often choose to comply with the strictest technical standard. This generates conformity with regulations and thereby market access to all relevant markets.

*Political dimension:* Global technical standards facilitate borderless globalization. If contradictory technical standards exist in different geographical locations, however, they generate distinct technological spaces. Hence, depending on the scope of their validity, technical standards can either facilitate global trade or create geographically bifurcated technological corridors. The result of the latter can be lock-in effects with political costs beyond the field of technical standardization itself.

For example, to date, technical standards in the railway sector remain largely national or regional. If country A adopted the national railway standards of country B – ranging from track gauges to traction technical parameters and voltage – the maintenance and further buildout of the railway cannot be carried out by suppliers other than those based in country B. Other suppliers produce non-compatible technology based on deviant technical standards. Country A is locked into country B's technology and fully reliant on supply from country B. Economists have long referred to these lock-in effects as “network effects” or “network externalities.”<sup>21</sup> These studies have convincingly demonstrated that high switching costs lead to the preservation of dominant technical standards;<sup>22</sup> standards developed in an early stage often prevail even if they are technologically inferior.<sup>23</sup>

Politically, this remains unproblematic as long as the respective product is not of strategic importance to the well-being of a society. Railways, however, are a critical infrastructure enabling the flow of goods and people thereby generating welfare and mobility. A lock-in effect in such a critical sector has political implications. If all suppliers that are compliant with the respective technical standards are based in country B, it could ask country A for political concessions in return for the maintenance and buildout of the critical infrastructure. Even if country B does not explicitly ask for such concessions, country A would think twice before adopting a confrontational stance on issues of core interest to country B in fear of the consequences for the functioning of its critical infrastructure.

Apart from such lock-in effects, some experts suggest that technical standards have the potential to impinge on what is often regarded as the crown jewel of state power: Security. In particular regarding cybersecurity, those who develop a standard could have a deeper knowledge of the technology including its vulnerabilities. If adopted as an international standard, the technology spreads globally. As a consequence, the developer of the technology in question possesses prime knowledge of its flaws that can be used to undermine an adversary's cybersecurity.<sup>24</sup> Other

observers counter that standardization is a process of maximum transparency in which it is hardly possible to hide security-relevant flaws from the eyes of the engineers of potential adversaries. From this perspective, a high degree of standardization even increases cybersecurity by means of transparency. Whichever perspective is more accurate, technical standardization influences the degree of cybersecurity.<sup>25</sup>

*Ideational dimension:* How technology is designed is highly political as it inscribes ethical values to it. Technology does not exist in a vacuum. Technical standards shape the physical world and contribute to the constitution of our social lives.<sup>26</sup> Hence, technical standards determine what is perceived as “normal” technology. Several critical scholars have described technical standards as social institutions in their own right.<sup>27</sup>

For instance, Wi-Fi is seldom questioned as the dominant WLAN standard. However, a few years after Wi-Fi had been established as the international standard, China proposed the WLAN Authentication and Privacy Infrastructure (WAPI) technology as a new standard. WAPI promised better performance but provided worse privacy.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the Chinese proposal failed mostly due to procedural issues.<sup>29</sup> Whether intended or not, by rejecting WAPI, international SDOs prioritized privacy over performance, shaping what consumers expect from WLAN technology.

This is not an isolated example. Emerging technologies are increasingly penetrating all spheres of public and private life. Whoever sets technical standards on algorithmic bias, data privacy, and similar issues shapes ethical, political, and security angles of key enabling technologies.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the ideational power of technical standardization is not limited to underlying ethical values. If a country shapes international technical standardization, it is likely to gain a reputation as a technology leader, which is a sign of societal progress beyond economic and military prowess.

In sum, the ability to shape international standards comes with increasing influence in economic, legal, political, and ideational terms that reach beyond the narrow field of technical standardization.

### **China's Growing Footprint in International Technical Standardization**

If the ability to shape technical standards comes with wider political influence, how can we measure such ability? This is more complex than one might think, not least because technical standardization spans a wide range of products and technologies and is in itself a highly technical process of negotiations among specialized engineers in which one proposal seldom fully prevails. Moreover, technical standards are developed in a multitude of international institutions. For example, in ICT, there exist more than 200 international SDOs.<sup>31</sup> To grasp the impact of an actor, in this case, China, a total of seven proxies need to be taken into account.

The first proxy is *leadership positions in international SDOs*. Almost all SDOs have institutional leadership with varying degrees of influence. Since the nature, processes, and composition of a great number and diversity of SDOs is varying, it might not be easy to identify the most relevant SDOs. For a study that aims to



grasp China's general influence on technical standardization, the broadest and most famous international SDOs should be considered. This includes the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), in which China has become a permanent member of the institution's main governing bodies, the ISO Council (in 2008) and the ISO Technical Management Board (in 2013). From 2015 to 2018, Zhao Xiaogang was the first Chinese citizen serving as rotating ISO President. Similar in importance to the ISO is the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), which was led by Zhu Yinbiao until the end of 2022. The third main international SDO, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), had been led by a Chinese official, Zhao Houlin, until December 2022. This demonstrates China's grown influence but also recent pushback against Chinese officials in leadership positions.

These institutional leadership positions help shape the agenda and are the result of preexisting power, but they come with relatively little impact on the actual standard-setting. For this process, a second proxy, namely *leadership in standard-developing committees of international SDOs*, often called "secretariats," is more crucial. Secretariats are supposed to be neutral,<sup>32</sup> but technical standardization experts agree that secretariats have an enormous influence by structuring, organizing, and coordinating the process.<sup>33</sup> Figure 8.1 demonstrates that China is far from dominating international SDOs in terms of technical leadership positions.

While China's share of leadership positions in the ISO and the IEC is still below that of leading European countries and the US, the PRC's proportion is constantly growing. Between 2011 and 2018, the proportion of China's ISO secretariats in Technical Committees (TCs) and Subcommittees (SCs) increased from 5.0% to 8.2%. By 2022, this share had risen again to 9.4%.<sup>34</sup> The PRC's growing representation in ISO leadership positions contrasts with falling or constant shares of European countries and the US. A decade ago, the US held 119 TC/SC secretariats in the ISO; today it leads 92 secretariats.<sup>35</sup> China's share of ISO technical leadership positions varies further across sectors.<sup>36</sup>

In the ITU Telecommunication Standardization Sector (ITU-T), however, China's influence is more apparent. In terms of sector members, the most influential type of ITU-T membership, and associate members, China ranks second behind

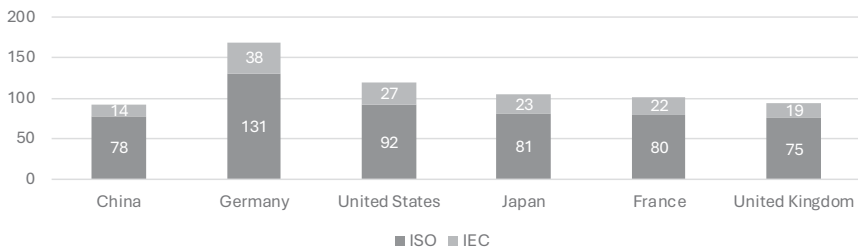


Figure 8.1 ISO, IEC secretariats of selected countries as of May 2023.

Source: ISO, IEC.

the US. The PRC is outcompeting all other ITU members in terms of academic membership, which is a membership type with reduced fees and less influence in the ITU. Even more impressive is the enormous *growth* in the PRC's membership. In late-2012, China had just 15 ITU-T members. By July 2019, membership had grown to 46.<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing, China has 100 registered ITU-T members.

In terms of technical leadership positions, China has gained a strong role in ITU-T as well. Study Group chair positions are almost equally distributed among leading ITU-T members. In the study period 2022–2024, the PRC fills one of 11 chair positions. Only Japan and South Korea have gained two seats each. In the previous study period of 2017–2021, China was one of a few countries that held two such chair positions. Of the much higher number of study group vice-chairs, China secured 8.7%, ahead of South Korea (7.7%), Argentina, Japan, and India (5.8% each) in the current study period. In the previous study period, it had a slightly higher share of 9.1%. China's share of leadership positions in the ITU-T working groups (including the Conformity Assessment Steering Committee) is even higher. In the study period 2022–2024, China has the largest share of chairmanships (24.2%), followed by Japan (15.2%) and South Korea (12.1%). This is a slight increase over China's 23.3% share in the study period prior to 2022. If the vice-chairs are taken into account, China's lead becomes even clearer. While China's share amounts to 23.5%, the United Kingdom (9.8%), as well as Argentina and Tunisia (7.8% each) follow at a great distance. In 2021, China held 18.4% of these vice-chair positions.

Technical leadership positions are important but not a necessary requirement to impact standardization. A third proxy, *participation in standard-developing committees*, captures which actors can submit proposals and comments to the standardization process. Figure 8.2 demonstrates that China's influence has grown enormously since 2007, having surpassed that of the US, France, and Japan and only slightly falling short of the United Kingdom and Germany.

Another measure for participation is the number of participants. Data from the Third Generation Partnership Project (3GPP), which is the leading international mobile network SDO, shows that, in 2018, China accounted for the highest share of participants (23.7%). Representatives from firms based in the EU and the US fell slightly short with 22.5% each.<sup>38</sup>

In many SDOs (including the ISO and IEC), membership in standard-developing committees requires regular contributions. Otherwise, national SDOs lose their status as active participants. However, membership does not reveal the *number of contributions* or *whether they are adopted*. Hence, such data is considered to be the fourth proxy. Statistics on standard contributions are rare and necessarily incomplete because technical standardization encompasses a wide variety of different products and technologies. This chapter exemplarily draws on technical standardization contributions to the development of one key-enabling technology that has received a lot of attention recently: 5G. Figure 8.3 demonstrates that China's share in 5G contributions ranks first and has increased from the previous generation of mobile technology, 4G/LTE.<sup>39</sup> If the two European states, Sweden and Finland, are combined, China ranks second to the EU.

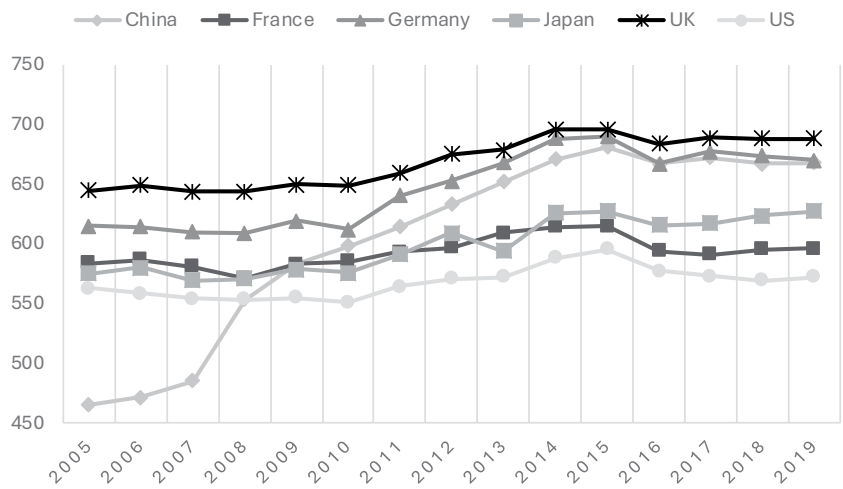


Figure 8.2 Active membership in ISO TCs and SCs.

Source: Data obtained by the author from AFNOR.

Most standard contributions are made by not just one company, but a group of firms. Often, this includes actors from several countries. Hence, the number of contributions as captured in Figure 8.3 does not adequately grasp the importance of a contribution made by a given firm. One method to circumvent this shortcoming is

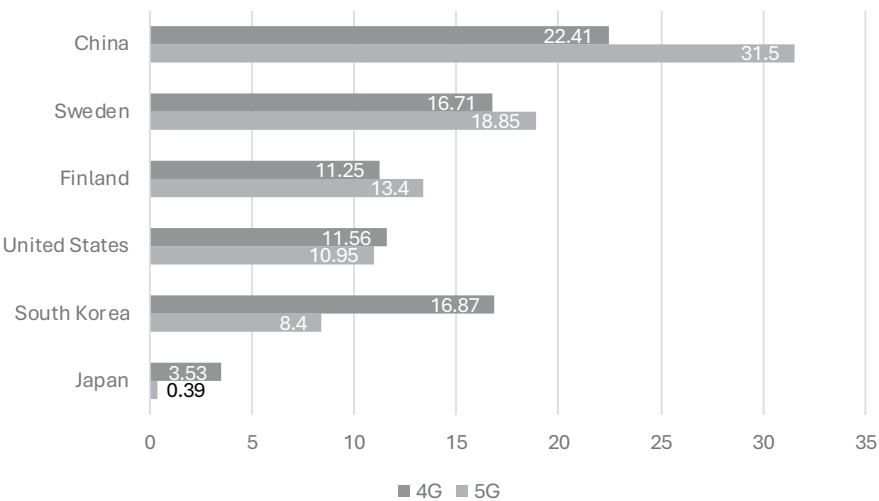


Figure 8.3 Share of standardization contributions (in %) to 4G and 5G standards by country.

Source: IPLytics.

to count only first contributors because contributing companies are normally listed in the order of their importance to a given standard proposal. Figure 8.4 illustrates that Chinese companies are the main first contributors to the 5G standard, surpassing even the combined contributions of European countries.<sup>40</sup>

Another method to calculate standardization contributions is to account each contributing company for its share. For example, if a standard contribution is submitted by four firms, each company is credited with 0.25 standard contributions. Figure 8.5 illustrates that, again, Chinese companies score best, followed by the combined contributions of European firms and entities from the US, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Canada.<sup>41</sup>

When 5G standardization contributions are compared to their adoption, however, IPlytics data reveals that China does slightly worse than firms based in Europe. Figure 8.6 summarizes the adoption of standard contributions.<sup>42</sup>

The data from 5G standardization is in line with findings on China's strength in standardization in mobile network technology more broadly. Figures 8.7 and 8.8 depict all standard contributions to 3GPP in 2018 and their adoption, respectively. According to both measures, Europe is slightly ahead of the PRC.<sup>43</sup>

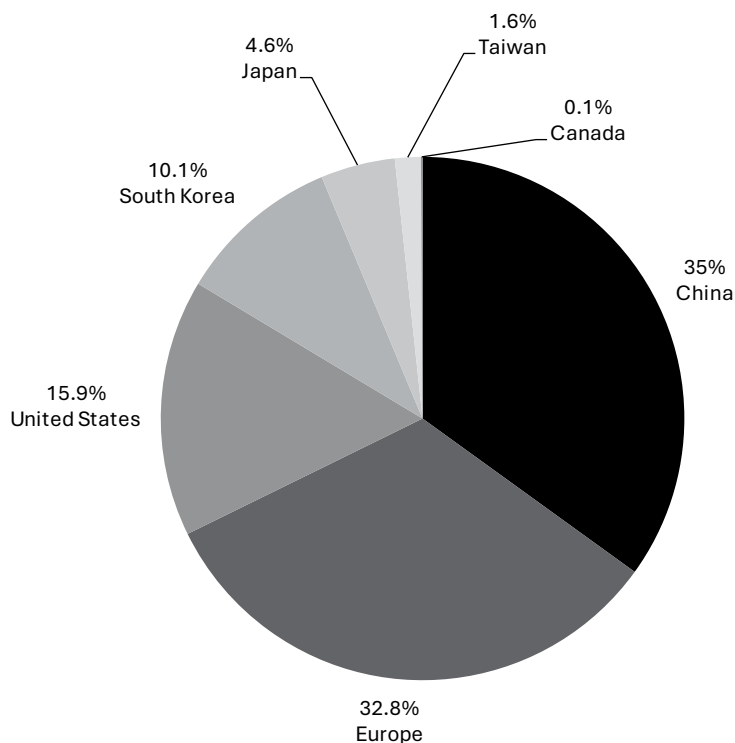
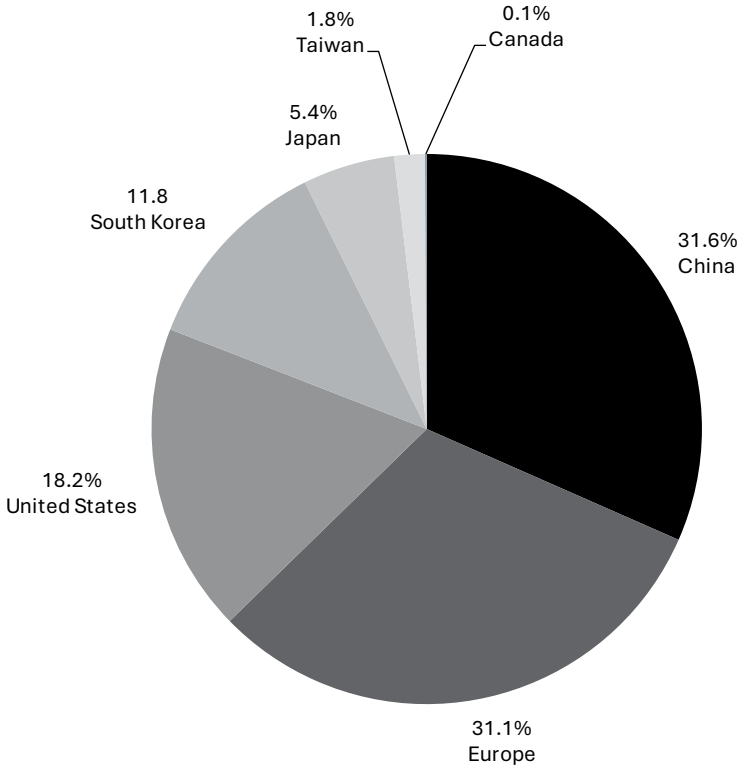


Figure 8.4 Share of first standardization contributions to 5G (in %) by country.

Source: IPlytics.



*Figure 8.5* Share of 5G standardization contributions by proportion of companies (in %) by country.

*Source:* IPlytics.

In the public discussion of standardization, another proxy is widely used to capture the influence of an actor on standard-setting: *SEPs declarations*. This is the case because standards of many key-enabling technologies such as 5G consist to a great extent of patented technologies. Very often, however, the way SEPs are discussed is misleading. Existing data only captures declarations of standard-essentiality, which should not be confused with actual standard-essentiality. Measuring SEPs is difficult because the actual standard essentiality of many patents remains unclear. When a standardization process starts, participating actors declare patents as standard-essential thereby indicating that they believe the respective patent could become essential for the standard and that they are willing to license the patent under FRAND terms. When a standard is established, no comprehensive analysis takes place that could establish whether the standard-essentiality declaration turned out to be correct. In some cases, firms file complaints against deviating assessments of standard essentiality by their competitors when demanding licensing fees. In most cases, however,

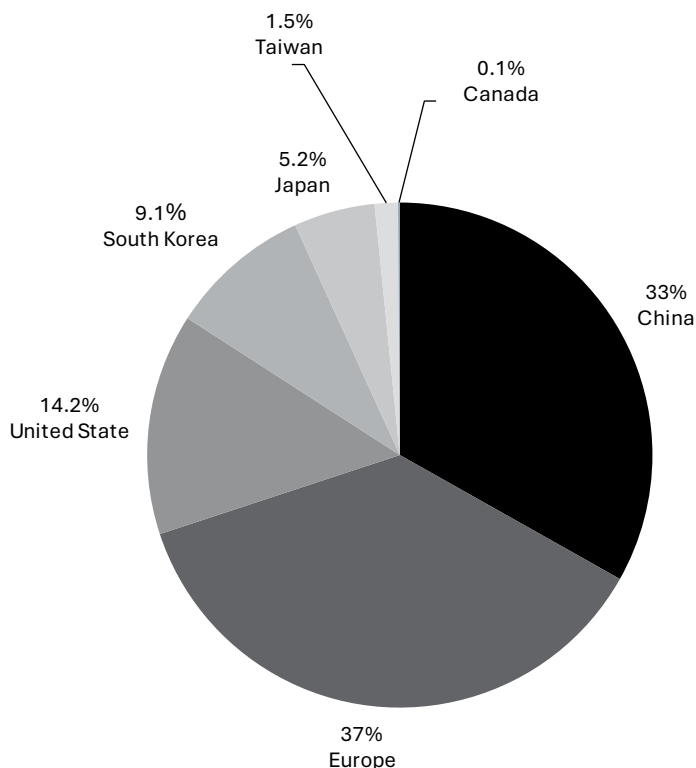
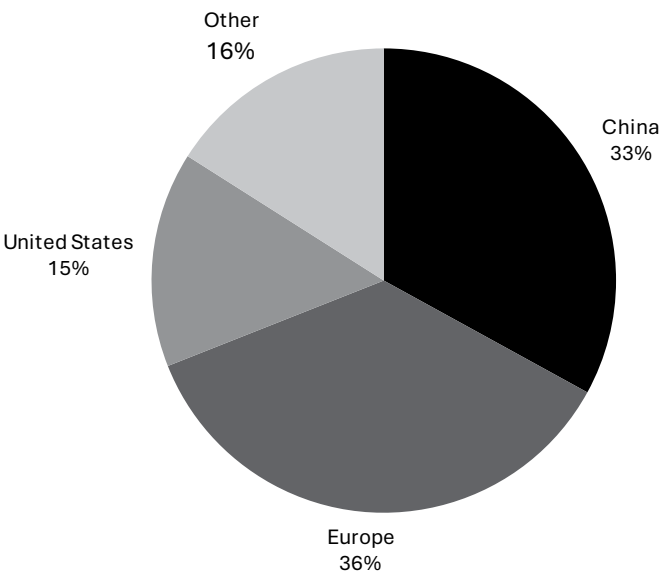


Figure 8.6 Share of adopted 5G standard contributions (in %) by country.

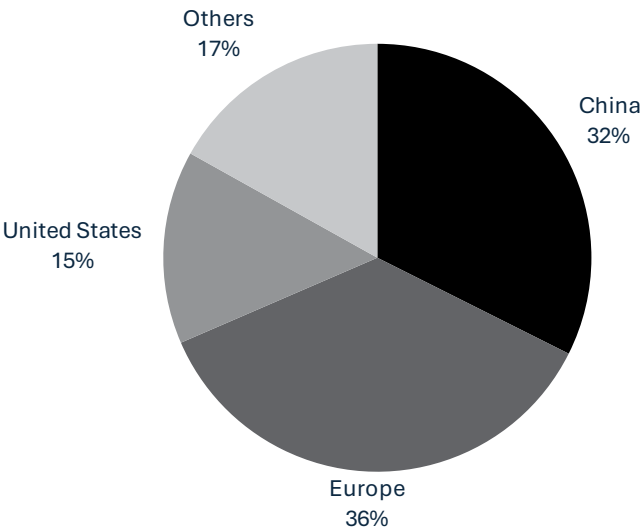
Source: IPlytics.

technology companies negotiate package deals exchanging licensing fees for groups of patents without assessing the standard essentiality of each individual standard. While observers assume that all companies declare more of their patents as standard-essential than turns out to be correct, this holds true for all actors involved. Figure 8.9 exemplarily depicts 5G SEPs declarations indicating that China is ahead of other actors.<sup>44</sup>

However, not every patent is technologically equal in importance to a given technology, in our example to 5G. Technological relevance is often calculated by means of the average size of a patent family and the average number of citations of the respective patent in other declared SEPs. While the size of the patent family is supposed to measure how extensive the patents are, the number of citations serves to indicate how relevant a certain patent is for other components of 5G technology by being referenced in other 5G-relevant patents. Based on the IPlytics database, Chinese patents turn out to be the least important compared with those filed by companies from other major technological leaders in 5G based in Europe, the US, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Canada.<sup>45</sup>



*Figure 8.7* Share of standard contributions (in %) to 3GPP in 2018 by country.  
*Source:* See Footnote 33.



*Figure 8.8* Share of adopted standard contributions (in %) to 3GPP in 2018 by country.  
*Source:* See Footnote 33.

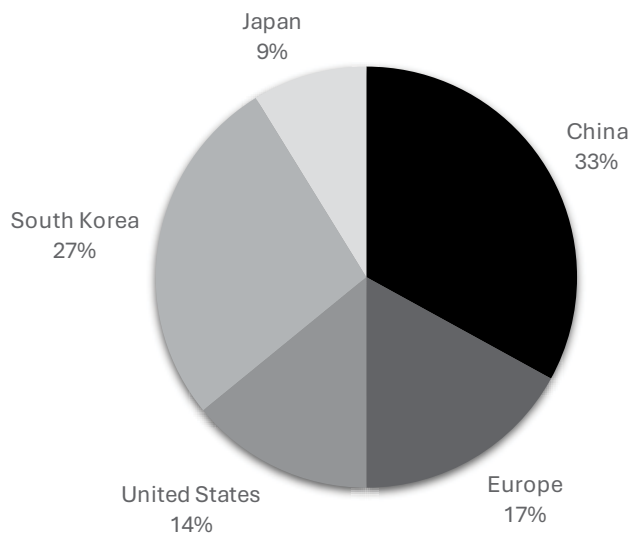


Figure 8.9 Share of 5G SEPs family declarations (in %) by country.

Source: IPlytics.

While all these quantitative proxies consistently point to a growth in Chinese impact on international technical standard-setting, hardly any figure can capture the entire development. Therefore, a sixth proxy is proposed that deals with the *qualitative description* of influence in the standardization. Interviews with participants in international SDOs help. For this chapter, more than 75 interviews with European and US representatives in international SDOs have been conducted. The results confirm the quantitative findings.<sup>46</sup>

China understands the value of standardization. Our Chinese colleagues have become very active participating in large groups in meetings. At first, they had to learn the rules of the game. Over the last decade, they developed into an integral and influential part of standardization community.<sup>47</sup>

While international participants in SDOs continue to see quality issues preventing a stronger Chinese influence, they also consistently acknowledge that China is improving.

A decade ago, our Chinese colleagues could contribute good proposals in only very few fields. To this day, many Chinese proposals are rejected because their technological quality is inferior to the contributions of other experts. Regardless of these continuous challenges, you cannot ignore the improvements. The time when some of my colleagues would not take Chinese contributions seriously are gone.<sup>48</sup>



This development has sparked fears among standardization experts from the US and Europe that China could outstrip Western countries in international technical standardization. One expert involved in ICT standardization exemplarily warned that

if China's influence in ICT standardization will continue to grow at the same pace, we will soon be on the receiving end. We are at a critical junction and are only slowly waking up. [...] We need to get better and live up to the challenge.<sup>49</sup>

Chinese standardization experts confirm in more than 30 interviews that their work has turned into a priority within China and that they believe they have made significant progress.<sup>50</sup>

Five or ten years ago, we could not make a lot of real contributions to international technical standardization. Our own innovation was not good enough, but we also did not quite understand the importance of standard-setting. [...] We are proud to say we have made much progress. But we still need to learn a great deal from Europe and the US.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, technical standards are not only developed in SDOs, but can also be established as *de facto* standards. Quantitative accounts of *de facto* standards are hardly feasible, which requires qualitative investigations including interviews. If one aims to generally grasp impact in *de facto* standard-setting, a focus on specific vehicles can be helpful. Exemplarily, this chapter explores the *role of the BRI* as a seventh and final proxy for China's influence in international standardization.

To begin with, China's BRI includes an explicit standardization dimension. In 2015, China's main macroeconomic agency, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), issued its first "Action Plan for the Harmonization of Standards along the Belt and Road."<sup>52</sup> In late-2017, the NDRC published another action plan setting further benchmarks.<sup>53</sup> As part of the plan, China began to translate its domestic technical standards into foreign languages to facilitate their adoption in third countries. By September 2019, China had signed 90 bilateral agreements on technical standardization cooperation with 52 countries and regions.<sup>54</sup> Chinese experts acknowledge, however, that the agreements are vague and often meaningless. A major state-sponsored research project, "China Standards 2035," suggests transforming these agreements into a regional technical standardization organization, the BRI Standards Forum, that could develop BRI Regional Standards.<sup>55</sup> Whether such a Forum could fulfill the ambitious goal of developing regional standards that are acknowledged along the BRI remains to be seen. The Forum, if established, could also simply serve to coordinate activities in the ISO and IEC with the potential to further strengthen Chinese influence in these institutions.

More importantly, many concrete BRI projects incorporate Chinese technical standards. It is through these projects that the PRC disseminates its domestic technical standards to third countries without submitting them to international SDOs (please see the case of railway standards above).

In sum, all seven proxies indicate a growing footprint though to different degrees. In other SDOs such as the Internet Engineering Task Force or the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, China's influence remains scarce. Hence, China does not dominate international technical standardization, but its ability to shape standards grows steadily.

### Implications of China's Standardization Power

The preceding sections substantiate the claim that China's impact on international technical standardization has grown and that this comes with influence in economic, legal, political, and ideational terms. Western observers have largely adopted a critical perspective on this development.<sup>56</sup> Is this justified? What are the risks emerging from China's growing "standardization power"? The remainder of this chapter identifies three exemplary sets of partly overlapping consequences that bear risks for specific groups of actors. These consequences include (a) a politicization of standard-setting, (b) a bifurcation of international technical standardization, and (c) power shifts in standardization. All three consequences play out in all four dimensions of standardization, namely economic, legal, political, and ideational.

*Politicization of technical standards:* Although historically a subject of power politics of states, the potential source of state power stemming from technical standards has largely been ignored by practitioners for the last few decades. The Chinese party-state's strategic approach to international technical standard-setting coupled with the emerging power competition over high technology is leading to a politicization of the subject. Not least China's growing footprint could lead other, primarily developing countries to consider adopting a state-steered approach as it is practiced in the PRC.<sup>57</sup> Such politicization alters the character of standardization.

In *economic* terms, the politicization incorporates a focus on the conditions upon which actors from different political entities get involved in international technical standard-setting. In strategic sectors such as key-enabling technologies, Chinese firms profit from party-state support ranging from soft loans for investments in research and development, preferential treatment in public procurement in one of the world's largest markets, or direct financial subsidies for standard development. Hence, technical standardization could be included in the West's drive to create a level playing field including sanction regimes.

Technical standards have further unfolded significant transformative force because once the world had agreed on a standard it was costly to change it. Complementary products and technologies would have needed to go through a process of adaptation generating switching costs. This relatively unquestioned character made international technical standards into an accepted part of international trade law. If technical standardization will increasingly be seen through a political lens, the "impartiality" attributed to standards could be undermined.

The politicization of technical standards also directs attention to cybersecurity implications of standard-setting. The section on "The Concept of 'Standardization Power'" above provides some indication of the *political* relevance of this development. For example, the US Department of Defense has issued concerns that

China's strong presence in 5G standardization could shift 5G technological development to focus on low frequencies while US manufacturers have prioritized high frequencies (mmWave). Some US experts argue that high frequencies provide a greater degree of security for wireless communications. Another concern is that US troops might need to rely on Chinese technology for their communications in overseas operations given Chinese strength in low frequency 5G technology.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the technological character of standard-setting negotiations has long covered the *ideational* dimension of standardization. Surely, technical standards have never been non-political in substance. However, the recent politicization could substantially change the process of standard-setting. The actors involved could pay more attention to ethical, societal, and political underpinnings of different technological solutions. Hence, technical standardization could turn into an arena of competition over values.

*Bifurcation of international standardization:* As a result of the politicization of technical standards, standardization could suffer from a divide into two camps. China could aim to develop a rivaling system of international standard-setting, with the BRI serving as its stepping stone to outcompete established standardization powers such as EU member states and the US. The PRC is a latecomer to the existing institutional system. Established standardization powers strive to preserve the system and integrate China into it without losing influence. This is trying to square the circle. China, in turn, as a novice in the game, is aiming to learn how to play its cards well in order to stretch the boundaries of the rules, or even to change them. For example, the BRI Regional Standards Forum could issue a new type of international standards. This would imply that China has created a new international institution that is Chinese dominated, rivaling and undermining the existing standardization institutions. Already today, a multitude of SDOs is competing for international influence. However, the ISO and IEC are the key platforms accounting for around 85% of all international product standards.<sup>59</sup>

The potential divide into two distinct spheres of technical standards carries direct *economic* risks. One of the main benefits of technical standards is that they provide interoperability, thereby facilitating international trade and harmonizing technical necessities for market access. The potential to sell products on global markets is a driver for technological innovation. If companies have to design products in a distinct manner for different geographic areas, they suffer from a loss of efficiency. The increase in costs would hamper innovation.

Similarly, if there was no common understanding of what accounts as an international standard in the future, courts and other economic dispute settlement bodies could treat competing international standards as benchmarks for their considerations. If China establishes more dispute settlement mechanisms – as it has started to do under the BRI framework – a fragmentation of international *law* could be the result of competing international standards.

A bifurcated international standardization would also facilitate *politically* relevant lock-in effects as described above. If standards are not global in scope, states depend on the supply of a potential adversary. In this context, several BRI railway

projects financed by China's state-controlled financial institutions have raised concerns, such as the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed railway, the Abuja–Kaduna railway, the Ethiopia–Djibouti railway, and the China–Laos railway. All these projects are based on domestic Chinese technical railway standards, which means that the respective countries must rely exclusively on Chinese suppliers to maintain and further build out their railway networks.

Another widespread concern is that technical standardization could turn into an arena of a new Cold War with two distinct blocks competing over values inscribed in technology. For example, China's expressed intention to invest in facial recognition standards<sup>60</sup> and its proposal for a reformed standard internet protocol, referred to as New IP,<sup>61</sup> have alarmed experts in Europe and the US. The fear is that political and ethical preferences shaped by the political and societal framework of the party-state are incorporated into international standards.

*Power shifts:* Established international technical standardization powers, primarily from Europe and the US but also Japan, fear that their impact on international standard-setting diminishes. In addition, the force of standards themselves could dwindle. *Economically*, a redistribution of resources is at the center of power shift concerns. Actors that used to gain large shares of royalties from SEPs could face a situation when they not only need to pay licensing fees to Chinese competitors but also bear switching costs when redesigning their technology.

Similarly, established standardization powers are concerned that they could not continue to write technical standards and thereby the rules shaping international supply chains and trade. Given the *legal* effects of international standards, this also comes with dwindling influence on international trade law.

A likely reaction is that groups of likeminded actors following *political* fault lines will engage in policy coordination to speak with one voice. This can already be witnessed in China. While the unity of the PRC party-state and its political economy is often overestimated,<sup>62</sup> by international standards, particularly in a field of national priority such as 5G, there is a fairly high degree of national coordination and cohesion. One example of such coordination is the IMT 2020 (5G) Promotion Group, which brings together Chinese public agencies, research institutes, and Chinese tech companies. This helps boost the reputation of standardization proposals as collective ones, rather than just the interests and solutions of an individual company.

At the same time, the ongoing transformations of international standardization shape the power that arises from technical standardization. From very different theoretical viewpoints, experts have argued that the specific force of technical standardization power stems from its appearance as being “non-political” or at least “hybrid.” In other words, shaping technical standards used to be particularly effective since it was hardly a subject of political debate and societal contestation.<sup>63</sup> This is not to say that no technical standardization power exists in the future, but rather that we will see a shift in the very nature of standardization power itself. The current explicit politicization of technical standards is stripping the “discreet” form of influence from standardization because the political underpinnings become explicit. Hence, the ability to shape standardization will not lead in the same way to

power which is part of an *ideational* transformation of the power that arises from international technical standard-setting.

Strikingly, not all actors involved in technical standardization see all three sets of consequences in a negative light or as a risk. The politicization of standardization and the power shift is particularly problematic for those that have a relatively strong position in the existing standard-setting. Many Chinese standards are also cheaper to purchase, which makes several developing countries welcoming a strengthened Chinese footprint. In particular, the bifurcation of international standardization, however, is problematic for a wide set of actors because it creates dependencies and tends to increase costs for innovation and trade.

### **Intentions, Intermediaries, and Institutions: Understanding Chinese Standardization Influence**

The examination of China's standardization influence is worth considering in light of the three "Is" – intentionality, intermediaries, and institutions – as introduced in the opening chapter of this volume. All three dimensions overlap, and only a careful understanding of existing tensions explains Chinese influence.

#### ***Intentionality***

Several party-state documents, first and foremost the National Standardization Outline but also the character of China's standardization approach as a state-directed one, illustrate the *intentionality* of China's standardization policy. China's party-state leadership understands very well the enormous influence that the ability to shape international technical standards carries. All four dimensions of technical standardization power are well reflected in the CCP leadership. A former Chinese Prime Minister, for example, surprised European guests when he held a 30-minute speech about the importance of technical standards without the need for a script.

This does not imply, however, that the political leadership necessarily understands the political implications of each and every standard that Chinese actors are advocating. These documents are highly technical, and ministry officials, let alone politicians, are not necessarily trained to understand such technicalities.

Similarly, China may have a preference for state-centric international standardization bodies, most prominently the ITU. China's leaders rightly assume that its state-directed system features stronger in such institutions than ones that are shaped by private industry. However, this intentionality is an instrumental one. There is no evidence that China advocates internationally for a state-directed standardization approach. If other states were to follow the Chinese example and consider it successful – as some observers fear could be the case in the near future – this would rather be an unintended consequence.

Standardization has never been non-political, not to speak of unintentional. However, the US–China technology rivalry coupled with China's state-directed standardization approach has politicized international standard-setting to the degree that it could turn dysfunctional. This is yet another possible unintended

consequence of China's approach as the PRC shows a strong interest in technical standards and there is hardly a sign to indicate it wants technical standards to be ineffective.

### *Intermediaries*

China's standardization influence is executed by a plurality of *intermediaries*. These include actors under tight central party-state control but also private- and state-owned companies and research institutions. These actors follow not only a political but also a commercial or technological agenda.

Companies, regardless of ownership structure, and research institutions send the vast majority of technical standardization experts to domestic and international standard-setting committees. The standardization reform of 2017/2018 has further strengthened their role. Only this reform has given China international credibility. Standards are only effective if they are applied by international peers. These peers are companies, not states. And these firms only accept proposals of high technological quality as reasonable. Chinese party-state actors, viewed with some skepticism in the first place, are not able to provide such high-quality standard proposals. Hence, China's growing standardization influence is the result of a partial liberalization process that put company intermediaries at the fore.

Even central party-state actors that could be thought to be under central political control carry significant independent agency. Many national ministries do not just fund independent research but host research institutions that carry out significant technological research work. In many cases, the technical experts of these organizations lead domestic standard-setting committees that prepare proposals that later become subject to international standardization. Their highly technical expertise is housed within ministries but does not necessarily follow a political logic. In China's case, many influential experts wear a dual hat as both party-state officials and researchers. Accordingly, both of these identities shape standard-setting practices. Policymakers – at all levels – hardly possess the knowledge and expertise, and technological logics can easily prevail over political calculations.

### *Institutions*

Simultaneously, China's standardization experts are shaped by the *institutions* that they operate in. International standardization organizations that are dominated by private companies such as the ISO or IEC lend fewer options for political domination compared to the ITU, which is an intergovernmental organization. Strikingly, China is more influential in the ITU than in the ISO and IEC.

Similarly, domestic institutions in host countries shape China's opportunities to influence standardization in third countries. A highly regulated and hierarchically structured system like the European one is least fertile to Chinese influence. In many BRI countries, by contrast, a lack of resilient institutions opens opportunities for China to spread *de facto* standards as part of BRI projects and bypass existing standards institutions.

As I have argued elsewhere in more detail,<sup>64</sup> however, it is hard to deny that China's state-directed domestic standardization approach does not shape its international behavior. The PRC has adapted to international practices, but its own state-centric model could translate into a role model for other countries and undermine the predominant Western approach of private standard-setting.

## Notes

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## **Part V**

# **Conclusion and Reflections**



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# Conclusion

## Reflections on the Study of Influence

*Steve Chan*

If someone asks me how great China's influence is in world politics, I will respond by asking her to clarify and elaborate her question. I will also caution her to be very skeptical of anyone who gives her a definite answer. The reason is simply that China's influence, and for that matter the influence of any country, is dependent on context. It is one thing for Beijing to succeed in soliciting a positive response from another country that is already predisposed to agree with it, but quite another when the target of its influence attempt is one that has an opposite preference and is inclined to resist this attempt (Goh 2014, 2016).

Influence is inherently a relational concept and therefore defies a generic answer. When speaking about China's influence, it is always relevant to ask compared to when, whom, and which issue area. China does not operate in a vacuum and its bargaining leverage varies according to issue areas and the constantly shifting balance of power between it and the target of its influence attempt. For example, although it is now an export powerhouse, its normative appeal and soft power still cannot match those of the U.S. Its values and institutions have not resonated with much of the rest of the world (Allan et al. 2018).

A recent study by Moyer et al. (2021) addresses some of these concerns. The authors examine China's potential influence, and that of the U.S., by pairing them each with various other individual countries in different issue areas such as security and economics. They conclude that in 2020 China's influence was greater than that of the U.S. in 61 countries, whereas the U.S. had more influence than China in 160 countries. Their index has the virtue of differentiating Beijing and Washington's respective influence according to different target countries and issue areas based on the intensity of these countries' interactions with each potential target country and the extent of asymmetry in these interactions. Strictly speaking, their index of Beijing and Washington's influence indicates only their respective *potential* or *opportunity* to attempt influence, and not influence itself. Moreover, it is also important to consider whether Beijing having more potential influence than Washington in Laos or Cambodia matters more than Washington having more potential influence than Beijing in Singapore and the Philippines. That is to say that the relative importance of the target country in international political economy also matters. It is one thing to have influence over Myanmar, another to have influence over Germany or Japan.



To illustrate that issue area matters, it is one thing to show that Southeast Asian countries may sometimes cooperate with and sometimes question Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, but it would be more revealing to study their responses to China's assertion of its "core interests" such as those relating to Beijing's sovereignty claims pertaining to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. The reason, as just implied, is that Beijing evidently cares more intensely about the latter than the former issue. Accordingly, Southeast Asian countries' stands on China's sovereignty claims, as they touch on a higher policy priority for Beijing (compared to, say, the Belt and Road Initiative), can tell us more about which of them are more willing to defy Beijing (such as distinguishing Malaysia and Brunei from Vietnam, all of them are claimants in the South China Sea disputes).

As mentioned already and as Chubb in this volume has cautioned, it is also important not to confuse a country's attempt to influence others with its influence *per se*. It is one thing to present evidence on such attempts or opportunities to mount such efforts, such as those presented by Benabdallah in this volume, but quite another to assume that they will produce successful outcomes, that is, to suggest the existence of influence itself. Conditions that appear to be conducive to successful influence attempts (e.g., social contact) are not tantamount to influence itself.

Chubb's analysis helps to unpack the idea of influence, and it points to the possibility of multiple motivations behind Chinese actions. The latter point cautions us against blanket assertions about the success or failure of any putative influence attempt because such attempts, like many things in life, may have a mixed outcome, encountering varying degrees of success or failure in different respects. Even though it may sound banal, the point about determining an actor's motivation is quite important. How do we know that China is trying to influence X, Y, or Z for this or that purpose? This is so because analysts often attribute a motivation to China's actions without bothering to establish this motivation. In other words, alleged influence attempts may just reflect an analyst's inference or surmise. How do we know that Beijing has set out to accomplish this or that goal? For all we know, China's actions may be driven by its subnational entities, bureaucratic politics, or just sheer organizational momentum.

Moreover, many studies of supposed Chinese attempts at influencing others are based on snapshots of a situation at one moment. They lack a dynamic perspective and do not attend to learning and adjustment. In these respects, Ye's study on China's Belt and Road Initiative is quite informative. This study is also refreshing in correcting the usual depiction of China in single-minded pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. Instead, Chinese behavior can reflect internal compromises, the political incentives of domestic stakeholders, the need to resolve or mitigate problems on the home front such as industry overcapacity, an opportunity for rent-seeking and corruption, or simply haphazard coordination, fortuitous timing, muddling through, and trial and error—or most likely, a combination of these and other factors. This combination may even include an element of strategic calculation, such as the Belt and Road Initiative's westward focus on the Eurasian continent with the possible intention of lessening China's vulnerability to a U.S.-led naval blockade

to choke off its seaborne trade and import of vital resources. That said, we often make the mistake of overestimating the purposefulness of China's and other countries' actions. Finally, Ye's study is helpful in reminding us that statecraft is not static but rather involves addressing moving targets.

Many studies also seem to me unwarrantedly one-sided when one presents China's attempts to influence foreigners or its overseas co-ethnics without putting these efforts in a comparative light. Thus, how do China's Confucius Institutes abroad compare with Alliance Française, Goethe Institute, or the Voice of America? Are Beijing's efforts to lobby foreign governments and compatriots abroad exceptional or unique? The longstanding influence of the Jewish, Korean, and "China" (i.e., Taiwan when it was ruled by Kuomintang's *ancient regime*) lobby in the U.S. comes to mind (Bachrack 1976; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). Is it indeed unlikely that any other state can match the resources and experience of China's overseas agencies as Chubb suggests? One may argue that although the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee is not a direct extension of Israel's government, it is undeniably closely aligned with Israel's preferences and an important player in U.S. electoral politics. Some studies insinuate that China engages in nefarious activities abroad to meddle in other countries' internal affairs when in fact such practices are undertaken routinely by other major powers. For example, the U.S. has been unabashed in proclaiming publicly its agenda to promote regime change abroad and convert the people of other countries, including the Chinese, according to its own image.

In my view, studies that focus *just* on China's influence attempts are by their very nature one-sided and therefore of limited value. A better approach would be to ask how effective these attempts have been compared to those of other countries. After all, not only domestic groups inside a target country but other countries as well are trying to influence its government—often lobbying it to act or not act in a direction opposite to Beijing's preferences. Benabdallah makes an especially valuable and refreshing point that influence is relational, and that it is usually a two-way process. Just as China can influence African countries, the latter countries can also influence China. Studies that give the impression that China as a juggernaut is always the one acting on other countries and that its counterparts are somehow passive or only reactive to Chinese initiatives are therefore objectionable for this reason. Such studies are one-sided not only because they overlook influence or counter-influence attempts by other parties, but also because they overlook that China itself can be the target of other countries' influence attempts.

At least implicitly, focusing only on China studies such as those in this volume gives the impression that China is somehow the only country that engages in this sort of behavior, such as practicing coercive diplomacy or meddling in other countries' domestic politics. Moreover, one may ask what sort of behavior is excluded from the purview of this book's topic. That is, what is *not* an influence attempt when we study statecraft? If the answer is nothing or very little, then we need to rethink what is gained by deploying this vocabulary. Indeed, we may be contributing to further confusion because, to quote Benabdallah, "influence is [such] a capricious and vague concept."

As Fung et al. in the introduction to this volume caution, we also cannot assume agents or agencies from China (such as those entities discussed by Chubb and Ye) are part of a unitary state. Put differently, they may “not be uniformly coordinated by a central authority” (p. 5); and their interests and preferences may not be aligned. These observations point to the principal-agent dilemma, a problem supported by many examples mentioned by Fung et al. The assumption of a rational, unitary state may help us to make analytic shortcuts, but it rarely corresponds to empirical reality.

The point that Chinese entities operating abroad are diverse and may even be competitive is underscored by Vangeli and Turcsanyi in their chapter on these entities’ operations in Central and Eastern Europe. These authors remind us that we also cannot assume that the target countries of supposed Chinese influence attempts are monolithic. Partisan groups often use the trope of Chinese influence to advance their competing goals and agendas in domestic politics. I find myself especially drawn to their conclusion that mimetic discourse on supposed Chinese influence tends to be sensational and even alarmist. In most cases, it reflects more hype than fact and is undertaken and propagated by political entrepreneurs with anti-Chinese motivations. Indeed, the persistence and dominance of such narratives in public discourse reflect Chinese weakness rather than strength, suggesting the extent to which China is still deficient in its soft power.

China has been accused of interfering with domestic politics and elections in the U.S. and Australia. Quite aside from the questionable effectiveness of such efforts as Chubb suggests, how does this practice differ from precedents established by Washington itself in overthrowing democratically elected leaders such as Iran’s Mossadegh and Chile’s Allende or even more egregiously, being implicated in plots to kill foreign leaders (e.g., Fidel Castro, Ngo Dinh Diem)? What evidence is there that Beijing has meddled in U.S. elections, compared to the voluminous documentation showing extensive U.S. attempts to influence electoral outcomes abroad, dating back at least to Italy’s 1948 election when the Central Intelligence Agency sought to prevent a victory by its communist party (Levin 2020). Why then single out China?

Whereas Chinese internet companies have been alleged to create opportunities to surveil and spy on foreign governments and citizens, studies on Chinese influence do not usually acknowledge the voluminous evidence disclosed by Edward Snowden, showing massive surveillance and spying conducted by the National Security Agency with the cooperation of U.S. telecommunications companies and European governments, including phone calls made by U.S. citizens (Richelson 2013). Much of the existing studies referring to Chinese influence attempts appear to be politically biased and analytically uninformative. They cast Chinese actions in a negative light without bothering to investigate comparable or even more questionable actions undertaken by other countries.

How do influence attempts become translated into actual influence? A target country’s sensitivity and vulnerability to the adverse consequences of another country’s actions, say, those by China are a relevant consideration (Keohane and Nye 1977). This is another way of saying that China’s influence depends not only

on the predispositions of the supposed target country (such as whether the two countries have convergent preferences), but also the latter country's policy capacity to resist Beijing and its domestic alignment of interests and power (including, as Fung et al. suggest, its existing institutions). Several contributors to this volume (e.g., Benabdallah, Chubb, Fu, Yeo, and Gloria) have pointed to the importance of a target country's domestic politics, whether it be an elite's search for political or performance legitimacy, its susceptibility to pressures from domestic interest groups, or nationalism on the part of its mass public, as an intervening variable that affects the success or failure of Beijing's influence attempt. Business leaders can be a "conduit of influence," and political entrepreneurs have agency (e.g., Benabdallah, Fu). Relatively few scholars try to spell out the relevant causal mechanisms that translate foreign influence attempts into policy outcomes in the target country. Yet it is obvious that Beijing will have an easier time influencing another country if this effort has a "tail wind" behind it (that is, if it resonates with the perceptions and preferences of the target government's important domestic constituents) compared to when it faces a "head wind," such as when it has to work against a skeptical, even hostile, public, as in the case of the Philippines described by Yeo and Gloria in this volume.

Importantly, China or any country's influence does not have to manifest itself in a visible reversal of the target country's policy, although such evidence is usually seen to provide proof of this influence. Typically, an analyst infers this influence or the effect of a policy intervention by examining how a target's behavior has departed from the preexisting trend line (see, for example, the famous quasi-experimental study in 1968 by Campbell and Ross, seeking to determine the extent to which Connecticut's speed crackdown had its intended effect in reducing traffic fatalities). Sometimes, however, stasis or no change in the target country's existing policy can be a sign of influence, such as possibly in a case when another country, such as the U.S., is seeking to change the target's policy in an opposite direction desired by China. In such cases, a stalemate or deadlock between two opposing countries lobbying the target may indicate that both have had an impact on the target. Moreover, as Fu in this volume has implied, when a dog fails to bark, it can present an interesting question for investigation, such as why Japan's supposed heavy commercial dependence on China did not moderate Prime Minister Koizumi's behavior. That on some occasions Japanese businesses have *not* lobbied their government as strongly as one might have expected illustrates another example of where researchers can gain analytic leverage by focusing on the study of a "deviant case." What have we missed that can help to account for this apparent exception to the norm?

Fu in this volume suggests that states with dense commercial ties have a vested interest in maintaining amicable relations. The more states trade, the more they are hypothesized to get along, presumably because both sides have an incentive to avoid the costs of trade disruption. This is certainly a distinct possibility. But this proposition also raises an endogeneity problem. Is it also possible that states that expect to maintain cordial relations are in the first place more likely to develop dense commercial relations, form alliances, and take similar voting positions in the

United Nations? This view suggests self-selection by states to form conducive relations with like-minded others. The causal arrow can be reversed to point to cordial relations leading to more trade. Alternatively, the relevant dynamics can suggest a reciprocal causal relationship between these two variables.

Fu's analysis addresses the Hirschmanesque effects of Japan's supposed commercial dependency on China, specifically in this case Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The basic idea advanced by Hirschman's (1945) well-known book, in which he examines the structure of Nazi Germany's trade relations with various Central and Eastern European countries as a source of Berlin's influence, is that asymmetric and heavy commercial dependency creates vulnerability or susceptibility for the weaker side to possible coercion by the stronger side, thus providing the latter the capability or at least the opportunity to influence the former. Thus, dense commercial ties can enable levers of coercion rather than the customary liberal expectation of pacifying interstate relations. Indeed, countries with such dense commercial ties have been known to go to war, as Britain and Germany did in 1914.

Fu's analysis raises an obvious and even more relevant case pertaining to cross-Strait relations. Taiwan has a heavy and asymmetric trade dependency on China, but its government has resisted Beijing's call for reunification and has even occasionally professed its interest in seeking eventual independence. This phenomenon therefore raises questions about the extent to which dense and unequal commercial relations provide political leverage for Beijing, and about the character of current and recent ruling regimes in Taipei. Do its leaders put "politics first" (that is, do they give priority to their agenda for political independence), or do they put "economics first" (to maintain the island's economic prosperity and viability as a more important goal, even if this preference puts their political agenda at risk, Benson and Niou 2005)? Even more intriguingly, why would leaders of the former type want to allow the island to become more economically dependent on the mainland; they should know fully well that deepening economic dependency can further subject it to unwanted Hirschmanesque consequences. It seems that a heavy and asymmetric trade dependency is not sufficient to guarantee successful influence attempts by the stronger side as shown also by the history of U.S.–Cuba relations after Fidel Castro took power.

Most people are familiar with Dahl's (1957: 202–203) definition of power (I will use power and influence interchangeably in this paper even though others have drawn a distinction between these two concepts), stating "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do." Although seemingly obvious and straightforward, this definition contains important and challenging implications. For example, how do we determine that A has sought to influence B? Moreover, how do we know A's intention (Fung et al.)?

I turn to an example to illustrate several concerns that stem from these questions. South Korea and Taiwan were aware that the U.S. wanted to discourage them from undertaking nuclear armament and that their pursuit of such armament would result in U.S. sanctions (note that my assertion that South Korea and Taiwan were aware of Washington's preference is just an assumption, as I did not provide

any direct evidence of their actual knowledge or perception). This recognition in turn led these U.S. allies to make preemptory concessions by terminating their nuclear programs. To repeat, the perceptions I attributed to Seoul and Taipei in this example are just my guess. Although unlikely, they might have been mistaken in their understanding of Washington's intention or preference or the intensity of its intention or preference.

In the above example, the result of South Korea and Taiwan's preemptive action in turn meant that the U.S. did not have to carry out its threat to sanction them. Seoul and Taipei discontinued their nuclear programs, and Washington therefore did not have to carry out any sanction against them. This claim indicates an important phenomenon, albeit one pointing to the non-occurrence of events. In this example, the non-occurrence of U.S. sanction against them surely does not mean that the U.S. lacked influence over these allies (Drezner 1999). History, however, does not record those events that did not happen, and analysts do not typically study why they did not happen. Their usual tendency is to instead search retrospectively for reasons that *might* have been responsible for the occurrence of an observed event (one that has happened) and to determine this event's causes or effects.

I mentioned earlier the idea of self-selection, referring to the natural tendency for all actors to enter only into those relations or encounters that they expect to be rewarding, and to select themselves out of others that they expect to be damaging to their interests, such as in the preceding example of South Korea and Taiwan making anticipatory concessions to avoid a confrontation with Washington. Again, although seemingly obvious and straightforward, important implications follow from this observation about self-selection.

In the first instance, A should select those B's that appear to it to be easy targets, that is, those that it can expect its influence attempts to prevail. It would eschew futile attempts to influence targets that appear to be in its view hopeless for it to manipulate. Wars are an extreme example of using armed coercion to influence another party. Data from the initiation of wars provide an interesting illustration in this context. Gartner and Siverson (1996) report that most wars are bilateral affairs, and they usually end in the initiating party's victory. This phenomenon accords with the expectation that A (in this case, the belligerent that started war) would pick vulnerable targets that are weak and would not likely receive assistance from allies. According to the logic of self-selection, states would not presumably start wars that they expect to end badly for them.

There is a further implication from this logic. When a country that can expect heavy costs if it defies a much stronger country such as the U.S. still proceeds with its nuclear program (or when it decides to even fight a stronger opponent such as China did in the Korean War), it must be highly resolved and therefore difficult for Washington to deter or otherwise prevail over. Thus, North Korea and Iran present hard cases for U.S. sanctions to succeed, precisely because these countries have knowingly selected themselves into a costly confrontation with the U.S. even when they know or can anticipate that this defiance will entail heavy costs for them. By the same token, if Beijing were to attack Taiwan (or to use a past example, when Beijing intervened militarily in the Korean War) even when it is (or was) fully

aware that the U.S. has a military advantage, it must have "private information" (Fearon 1995), such as those pertaining to its resolve, morale (or Washington's lack thereof) or some other factor that gives it optimism about its prospects of prevailing in the end in a dispute with or contest against a stronger adversary (or at least "private information" that led this actor to believe that there are other factors operating in its favor to nullify or neutralize the supposed advantages enjoyed by a stronger adversary).

This logic inferring hard cases for a country's influence attempts suggests that when a country decides to escalate to coercive actions, such as when the U.S. resorts to sanctions against another country like Russia, China, or Iran, or when China denies or restricts water access to India, as shown in Ho's study in this volume, its action is more likely to fail because it faces a more determined opponent, one that has already discounted the prospective costs of defiance and resistance. Weaker parties representing the easy cases would have already yielded, thus selecting themselves out of such a possible confrontation. For a more general discussion of this phenomenon and related empirical evidence, the readers are referred to James Fearon's work on deterrence (1994, 2002).

I am especially attracted to Ho's discussion of ideational power, soft power (Nye 1990, 2004), and structural power in the tradition of Susan Strange (1987) and Michael Barnett and Bud Duvall (2005). This conception of power suggests that A can have influence over B even when it does not act directly or overtly to affect B's behavior. In contrast to the earlier example of South Korea and Taiwan discontinuing their respective nuclear programs, the kind of influence being raised in the current context stems from B's voluntary submission or compliance with A's preferences and not its fear of being punished. In fact, B may even behave in a way preferred by A without it being aware that it is doing so because it has been coopted by A to identify with A and to see A's interests as its own interests.

To explore further Dahl's definition, it is also important for analysts to know B's original intention in their effort to establish A's influence. Can we conclude that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has had influence over the former USSR because Moscow had refrained from attacking its member states (a non-event)? Similarly, can one argue that Beijing has thus far not attacked Taiwan because it has been deterred by the U.S.? One can only reach this conclusion if one can be certain that Moscow and Beijing would have attacked were it not for the NATO and U.S. deterrence. But how do we know B's original intention? The fact that an event, in this case an attack, did not happen does not necessarily mean that deterrence has succeeded.

Danilovic (2001: 97) quotes Henry Kissinger saying, "Since deterrence can only be tested negatively, by events that do *not* take place, and since it is never possible to demonstrate why something has not occurred, it became especially difficult to assess whether the existing policy was the best possible policy or a just barely effective one. Perhaps deterrence was even unnecessary because it was impossible to prove whether the adversary ever intended to attack in the first place." Dahl's definition requires analysts to think counterfactually, that is, to ask how B would have acted in the absence of A's influence attempt (in the above example, in the

absence of A's attempt to deter). Yet few analysts in the extant literature make this attempt.

An example may help. There is the story of a Brooklyn boy who goes out to the street to jump up and down and shout every day at noon. One day, a neighbor finally asks him about the reason for this bizarre behavior. The boy answers, "to keep marauding elephants from our neighborhood." The neighbor retorts, "But there are no elephants in Brooklyn." The boy replies, "You see, it works."

Yeo and Gloria's chapter provides a nice case for applying counterfactual reasoning. These authors suggest that despite Beijing's substantial investment in public diplomacy, the Filipino people's attitudes toward China have not changed significantly over time, and these attitudes have remained largely negative. The authors attribute the latter phenomenon to the Filipinos' nationalism or national identity aroused by Beijing's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. One may, however, ask whether negative views of China would have been even more pronounced and pervasive if China had not undertaken its public diplomacy. The current level of Filipinos' skeptical, even hostile, attitudes toward China could have been even higher were it not for Beijing's efforts at public diplomacy and perhaps also in view of the cultural and political influence of the U.S. given its close historical ties with the Philippines. As suggested by such "what if" questions, the fact that there has not been a significant shift in Filipino public opinion in a direction more favorable to China does not necessarily mean Beijing's public diplomacy has failed. Stasis or continuation of an ongoing trend may signify the effectiveness of an influence attempt if in its absence one can expect these countries' South China Sea dispute to have led to even more negative Filipino attitudes toward China.

Can A have influence over B without trying to influence it overtly or directly? Of course. As already hinted earlier, all that is required for A to have influence over B is for B to be somehow aware (even if subconsciously) of the unequal social, economic, and political positions characterizing their relationship, such as those between master and slave, employer and employee, and teacher and student. This inequality confers advantages, even privileges, to A while restricting the options available to B. Barnett and Duvall (2005) and Strange (1987) call this A's structural power over B. Again, an example can be helpful to illustrate this point. People or countries who have their assets denominated in the U.S. dollar may unconsciously identify their interest with U.S. interest because poor U.S. economic performance would hurt their finances.

As already mentioned, Ho in this volume presents a case of Chinese structural power in relation to the other riparian states in the Mekong region. The latter countries acknowledge Beijing's structural power, even to the point of sometimes seeing China's interests and preferences as their own. This sort of power can influence B's conduct even when B acts subconsciously as a matter of custom or habit. B is entrapped by the circumstances it finds itself in, and it accepts the inevitability and even the legitimacy of the existing circumstances. It is coopted by A, seeing its role or fate as natural and appropriate. It takes on an identity that is self-denying or self-limiting. Beckley (2011–2012: 49), for example, notes that "foreign governments that hold dollar reserves depend on U.S. prosperity for their continued economic



growth and are thus 'entrapped,' unable to disentangle their interests from those of the United States." Marxist literature from an earlier era is replete with references to false consciousness, such as when the proletariat adopts the values, interests, and even identity of the ruling capitalist class (e.g., Gramsci 1971). Mass publics often rally to nationalist causes, even wars, even though they should have known that the burden of payment in blood, sweat, tears, taxes, and inflation will fall disproportionately on them.

Institutional power is one of the four types of power presented by Barnett and Duvall (2005). It includes but is not limited to an actor's ability to determine agenda, establish protocols, control schedules, and set the rules of engagement. Ruehlig in this volume discusses China's participation in setting technical standards in an increasingly politicized world of high technology. His analysis is compelling because setting these standards can have a lock-in effect or network externality, entrapping others adopting these standards into a dependency relationship in future transactions. As such, institutional power can evolve into structural power. Ruehlig's study presents two interesting features. First, he introduces multiple indicators that serve as proxies of possible Chinese influence. This feature serves to offset the limitations of each individual indicator by seeking cross-validation from multiple sources. Second, he demonstrates the potential for the Belt and Road Initiative to enhance Chinese influence, one that is separate from Fu's Hirschmanesque consequences of creating direct financial or commercial dependency. By introducing China's technical standards to its counterparts in this Initiative, Beijing can develop a more subtle or less visible form of influence through lock-in effects and network externality.

Farrel and Newman (2019) have shown that the dominant network position enjoyed by the U.S. in internet communication and international banking gives it enormous power to extract information (the panopticon advantage) and enables it to put a financial stranglehold on adversaries (the chokepoint leverage). Washington derives this power from the fact that most large internet and banking institutions are located inside the U.S., and through its control of such institutions as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers and the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT), its policies can acquire extraterritorial reach. For example, Washington has used SWIFT to mount an economic blockade against Iran, North Korea, and most recently, Russia in the aftermath of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, cutting them off from international financial transactions. Similarly, the pivotal position enjoyed by the U.S. in international networks of electronic communication gives it an enormous advantage in monitoring international information flows, just like the advantage conferred by SWIFT for it to track cross-border financial flows. As a result of this position, it can undertake vast programs of surveillance as disclosed by Edward Snowden. These are important assets for applying influence, if not influence in itself.

To continue the dissection of Dahl's definition, matters are even more complicated because we cannot always be certain about the identity of either A or B. As already mentioned, they are usually not unitary or monolithic actors. But even if we assume that they are rational, unitary actors, there can still be analytical challenges

and factual uncertainties. Take the example of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Was this a case of the U.S. prevailing over the former USSR, compelling Moscow to withdraw its missiles from Cuba, missiles that Washington claimed to have an offensive purpose? Or alternatively, was it a case of the USSR trying to deter the U.S. from attacking its ally Cuba yet again (after the Bay of Pigs invasion) by introducing missiles to Cuba as a defensive move? Even after extensive research of this episode, we still cannot settle the question about which country, the U.S. or the USSR, was A and which one was B.

Naturally, the prevailing Western narratives in this example almost invariably cast Washington in the role of A, even though it has been widely reported that it and Moscow had struck a secret deal, exchanging promises that the USSR would withdraw its missiles from Cuba and the U.S. would reciprocate by withdrawing its missiles from Turkey and refraining from invading Cuba ever again (Allison 1971). This example shows that discourse on influence can be politically motivated to give a particular spin to history. Moreover, even long after a historical event, analysts can still be uncertain in designating who is the influencer and who is the influenced.

Indeed, we cannot be sure that there is only one B, and that A's actions toward B might not have C, D, and E also in mind. For instance, Western deterrence threats against Russia in the crisis involving Ukraine can easily have China also in mind because there is an obvious parallel to this latter country's relations with Taiwan. Surely, Beijing is not unaware of the possibility that Washington has designed its policies toward Moscow with their demonstration effects on Beijing in mind. Thus again, analysts will have to be more careful in their identification of the supposed target(s) of A's influence attempt. The U.S. attack on Iraq might very well have been intended at least in part as a warning to the other two members of the Axis of Evil, namely, Iran and North Korea.

Chong and Poh (2020) have written about the practice of following the Chinese maxim of "killing a chicken to warn the monkeys." Indeed, sometimes B might not even be the primary target of A's influence attempt, such as when in some situations Beijing's policies toward Taipei or Pyongyang were really intended to influence Washington's policies, or as attempts to determine Washington's intentions or to signal its own intentions to Washington. China's previous shelling of the offshore islands of Matsu and Quemoy comes to mind. As another example, Washington's attempts to influence Taipei from moving too close to declaring *de jure* independence (especially during Chen Shui-bian's administration) were clearly motivated by its concerns about Beijing's possible reaction to such a development.

All of this is to say that scholars need to be more careful in their analysis of influence, whether that of China or any other country. Much of the current literature is too facile and tends to reflect punditry following popular, often politically motivated, narratives. They often take the possession of material resources (such as weapons, territory, manufactured goods, or gross domestic product) as an indication of a country's power or influence without asking about its capacity to mobilize and deploy these resources effectively. As Arbetman and Kugler (1997) and Kugler and Tammen (2012) point out, countries with a larger resource base do not

necessarily perform better economically or militarily. The oil-exporting countries' inability to enhance their social and human capital, and Israel and Vietnam's superior performance on the battlefield come to mind as obvious examples. Political capacity matters (Chan 2023, forthcoming).

One cannot simply tally up, say, China's number of missiles or warships, or its foreign reserves, and equate its possession of these assets with Beijing's influence. If one were to do this, such as if one were to accept the well-known Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) developed by the Correlates of War Project at the University of Michigan (CINC is based on such variables as the size of a country's population, its steel production, its energy consumption, its number of military personnel, and the amount of its defense spending, see Singer et al. 1968), one would have concluded that the USSR was the most powerful country in the world—just a few short years before it collapsed and went into historical oblivion. Much of the literature on power transition and Thucydides's Trap is seriously flawed because it only attends to a country's possession or production of raw material, such as the size of China's economy compared to that of the U.S. (Allison 2017; Organski and Kugler 1980), without considering the less tangible aspects of national power and especially a country's ability to maintain and sustain its leadership position at the technology frontier by undertaking and initiating important innovations and inventions (Chan forthcoming; Thompson and Zakhirova 2019).

Finally, the extant literature, such as those studies that try to rank countries by their supposed power, also often overlooks the fact that countries do not operate in a vacuum. A country's influence attempt can expect to encounter pushback from other countries. Thus, at the very least, influence is the outcome of two opposing forces or wills. It cannot be assessed in isolation without regard to the nature and capabilities of the counterpart involved in an influence relationship or the pertinent issue domain. When the current literature does consider this counterpart, such as in studies on power transition and Thucydides's Trap that match China against the U.S. in a potential showdown, it tends to use countries as its accounting units.

This practice is problematic because it overlooks the importance of coalitions or alliances. The outcomes of both world wars were determined by the overall weakness of the Axis Powers compared to their opponents. Analyses that try to present these wars as a challenge mounted by Germany to displace Britain's global preeminence ignore the collective strength of the coalition to which Britain belonged. Their narrative claims that Germany was catching up to Britain or had already done so, and points to this phenomenon as the basic cause of the two world wars. Even setting aside the question of international coalitions or alliances, one may ask whether the accounting unit for making comparisons in these instances should be Britain proper or the British Empire. The relevance of this line of reasoning for China's power or influence in today's world should be obvious. Whereas the U.S. has many allies and partners, China has few associates, and those that are usually aligned with it (e.g., Myanmar, North Korea, and Pakistan) can hardly be expected to affect the international balance of power.

Tellis (2015), following Boudon and Bourricaud (1989), provides a cogent review of three conceptions of power (or influence) as the possession of raw

resources, the ability to use these resources effectively, and the exercise of control over the outcome of events. In analyzing China or any country's influence, scholars would do well to keep these conceptual distinctions in mind. I conclude this essay with two final examples. Although the U.S. commands one of the world's best medical facilities and personnel, its performance in the COVID pandemic has been much worse than countries with more meager resources. The reason has to do with its relative deficiency in leadership, social trust, and political capacity (Fukuyama 2020). Similarly, U.S. superiority in the possession of sophisticated weapons and powerful munitions did not lead to its victories over ostensibly weaker opponents in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, or its campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Political capacity to utilize the resources at hand, greater dedication to one's cause, and a willingness to endure privations and to persevere over the long haul are among the more intangible factors determining the outcome of influence attempts, in this case, in contests to prevail on the battlefield or public opinion in the adversary's home court (Arreguin-Toft 2001). These comments and generalizations are equally applicable to China when one tries to assess its influence or power in international relations.

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