

# CPC Futures

The New Era of  
Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics

Frank N. Pieke and  
Bert Hofman, editors



# 22

## National Security and Chinese Foreign Policy

Xiaoyu Pu

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Beijing's refusal to condemn Moscow generated an international backlash, especially in the U.S. and Europe. A *New York Times* article, for instance, speculated that Chinese officials knew about Putin's military plan but asked Russia to delay the invasion until after the Beijing Winter Olympics (Wong and Barnes 2022). Almost two weeks later, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, finally stated Beijing's position. Qin emphasised that Beijing did not have prior knowledge of Putin's plan and would not support the war (Qin 2022).

The perception of Beijing's potential colluding with Putin certainly damaged China's reputation in the eyes of the elites and public in the West. Whilst China's partnership with Russia is strategically important, it also damages Beijing's broad economic ties with Europe and the U.S. that are even more essential for the Communist Party of China (CPC) to continue delivering economic growth.

This chapter will show how the CPC's evolving notion of national security increasingly shapes the conflicting interests and incentives that inform Chinese foreign policy. It is widely recognised that Beijing has a hierarchy of security concerns with regime security at the top. Beijing must also balance competing incentives, including potential tension between security interests and economic development.

### National Security with CPC Characteristics

The CPC's top concern is regime security; the second is regional security in Asia; and the third is global security. Together, they constitute the "holistic view of national security" that Xi Jinping put forward in 2014 (Xi 2014).

During a study session on national security held by the Politburo of the CPC Central Committee in 2020, Xi Jinping specified 10 requirements for pursuing such a holistic approach to national security. At least two of his key points are related to CPC regime security, including “upholding the Party’s absolute leadership over national security work” and “giving top priority to political security, safeguarding the security of state power and the political system” (Xinhua 2020).

These narratives on national security are consistent with the analysis of leading international China watchers. According to former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd, Xi Jinping’s worldview has ten concentric circles of interests, and the first is the politics of staying in power (Rudd 2022). Andrew Erickson of the U.S. Naval War College argues that China has a hierarchy of security interests. In descending order of importance these include: “party leadership, centralised administration of the core Han heartland, stability of ethno-religious borderlands, integrity of land borders and security of coastlines, resolution of near-seas sovereignty claims, and safeguarding of overseas interests” (Erickson 2019).

Beyond domestic security, China has traditionally emphasised regional security in East Asia. Within Asia, the U.S. military presence in Asia is seen as a threat to Chinese security interests (Liff 2018). Beyond the region, China has several reasons to be concerned about global security. As China has a growing economic footprint in many parts of the globe, Beijing must carefully think about how to preserve its expanding overseas interests (Ghiselli 2021). As a major nuclear power and a permanent member of United Nations Security Council, China also has responsibilities for security issues like non-proliferation.

The Chinese notion of holistic security emphasises the interaction of international security, domestic security and regime security. Such a holistic view also means a broader perspective on national security, including traditional security and non-traditional security in multiple policy domains. Highlighting the notion of common security, China emphasises that national security should be balanced and sustainable, and Chinese leaders often assert that countries should not seek absolute security in their foreign relations (Zhang and Feng 2021). Recently, Xi Jinping rebranded the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security as a part of China’s “Global Security Initiative” (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

## **Chinese Foreign Policy in Xi Jinping’s New Era**

As China emerges as a global power, Xi Jinping implements a more ambitious and assertive foreign policy. While not necessarily challenging all aspects of the

liberal international order, Beijing is strongly resolved to defend its interests. As China's diplomatic signalling is domestically oriented, Beijing's soft power promotion is sometimes counter-productive. Rather than seeking to appeal to international audiences, Chinese diplomatic efforts to cast the CPC in a more attractive light are predominantly aimed at China's domestic audience. Chinese "wolf warrior" diplomats are popular at home, even though they often damage rather than improve China's international image and soft power.

China has been trying to play a more active leading role in regional affairs (Pu 2018). Beijing wants to reassure its neighbours that China's rise is not a threat, but provides more opportunities for development and international public goods for the benefit of all. On the other hand, Beijing also wants to maintain its credibility for coercion or deterrence to maintain its leverage in territorial disputes. While Beijing is concerned about U.S. military presence in Asia, "China is focused on diminishing the ability of the United States to play a decisive role in China's sovereignty disputes, especially Taiwan, not kicking the United States out of the region" (Fravel 2020: 96).

China has an ambivalent attitude toward Western powers, foremost the U.S. but also including Australia, Canada and increasingly Europe. For the Chinese, the West has always been a significant source of both desire and resentment. In the post-Cold War era, Chinese elites feared that Western political influence could damage China's national unity and regime security.

Furthermore, China's strategic partnership with Russia is partially driven by the two countries' shared resentment against U.S. domination in global affairs. While dissatisfied with some elements of the U.S.-dominated order, China's approach towards the existing world order is different from that of Russia. While Russia is essentially a risk-taking, declining challenger, China is a cautious rising power which benefits from the current order. While today's China is economically more powerful than the Soviet Union ever was, China cannot yet balance the U.S. militarily as the Soviets did during the Cold War. Even in Africa where China might have strong political influence, China's military presence is minimal.

The Global South is important for China because it has been traditionally regarded as the basis of China's international support. Even as China has emerged as the second largest world economy, Beijing often emphasises its developing country identity to indicate solidarity with the global South. Moreover, as China's economy continued to grow, the global South became a crucial source to satisfy China's increasing resource and energy needs.

The CPC's holistic notion of national security has important implications for Chinese foreign policy. Many American analysts assert that Beijing has a

coherent grand strategy to replace the U.S. as a global leader (Pillsbury 2015; Doshi 2021). The Biden administration views China as the most significant challenger with both the intention and the means fundamentally to reshape the global order (U.S. Department of State 2022). However, China's rise as a global power remains contested domestically and internationally (Pu 2019; Jones and Hameiri 2021). With domestic security as its top concern, China's international ambition might be more limited than is often assumed. Unable to offer a universally appealing ideology, the CPC promotes a parochial brand of authoritarian nationalism, often generating international backlash instead of providing an attractive alternative vision to the liberal order (Weiss 2019). Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not seek to spread its political model around the globe. That being said, the external ramifications of China's domestic governance still generate international concerns in many parts of the world on issues such as human rights and cyber security.

Moreover, the holistic notion of national security has potentially negative ramifications for China's foreign policy. Chinese leaders often emphasise that absolute security is not an achievable goal internationally; nevertheless, it seems that the CPC is increasingly seeking absolute security internally. Overemphasising regime security might create a paranoid mindset among the CPC's leadership and even in Chinese society more generally. For decades, China has benefited from its economic and social openness to the outside world.

With the securitisation of domestic policy, Beijing might treat an increasing number of policy issues as matters of national security. Beijing prioritises political information control in cyberspace, weakening its technological resilience rather than enhancing its cybersecurity (Lindsay 2014). Through civil-military fusion, the CPC has expanded its political control over business and educational sectors (Bitzinger 2021, see also the chapter by Tai Ming Cheung in this volume). Through various laws, regulations and policy initiatives, the CPC increasingly disciplines private enterprises and tech companies (Pearson, Rithmire and Tsai 2021). Viewing COVID-19 not only as a public health problem but also a political concern to CPC regime security, the Chinese leaders have refused to fundamentally change their zero-COVID strategy despite its huge social and economic costs (Huang 2022). Tightening political control confirms Western convictions that China is indeed a strategic competitor with an alternative vision of domestic governance and global order. Conversely, with the securitisation of almost all policy areas, the CPC will inevitably perceive threats everywhere, both domestically and from abroad.

## Conclusion

To understand the implications of China's global rise, it is crucial to understand China's notion of national security with CPC characteristics. While CPC leaders emphasise a holistic view of national security, regime security has always been Beijing's top concern. This domestically-oriented notion of national security has shaped Chinese foreign policy in a fundamental way. It has constrained China's ambition to become a truly global power even though its economic power has grown dramatically. Beijing's assertive foreign policy has generated a backlash in the West as well as in some neighbouring countries. Regarding regional security in Asia, China seeks to play a more active leadership role. While Beijing has several reasons for concern about global security, China is not yet seeking to build a global military presence. In this context, the assertion of China becoming a new global hegemon might be overblown.

Ultimately, Beijing must carefully balance competing priorities as it handles its national security challenges. One of the most important aspects in Chinese strategic thinking is the coordination between domestic and international policy. The other challenge is the potential tension between security and economic development. Since the late 1970s, China has achieved impressive economic growth and rapid social development through pragmatic reforms and its openness to the world. In preparation for the 20th Party Congress to be held in late 2022, the CPC is increasingly tightening political control in many domains with regime security as its top concern. Meanwhile, China is facing rising economic, social and foreign policy challenges. With the relentless pursuit of absolute security in so many issue areas, the CPC might potentially damage China's openness as well as its social dynamism. If the CPC's policies weaken China's economic growth and innovation, the security-enhancing measures could ultimately weaken the foundation of China's national security. This is China's paradox of national security in the new era.

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