

18

Chinese Grand Strategy

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Chapter Contents

18.1 Introduction	315
18.2 The History of Chinese Grand Strategy	317
18.3 Chinese Grand Strategy in the Xi Jinping Era	321
18.4 Domestic Determinants of Chinese Grand Strategy	325
18.5 China in International Institutions	326
18.6 China's Contemporary Maritime Strategy	328
18.7 Conclusion	330



Reader's Guide

The rise of China from a poor, isolated country to a prosperous and powerful one in the space of 40 years is one of the most interesting and impactful phenomena in international relations. China's grand strategy has evolved over time from strategies of survival under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to regaining its standing as a major power under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now Xi Jinping. Xi's China has been particularly proactive about building Chinese economic, military, and political power, and has been explicit about leveraging this to become a global power and a dominant power in Asia. In addition to external threats and opportunities, domestic factors also shape the contours of Chinese grand strategy. Debates about Chinese intentions, in particular towards international institutions and military expansion, colour perspectives on the potential impact of Chinese grand strategy and the degree to which other countries should attempt to undermine it. These topics—the evolution of Chinese grand strategy, its drivers, and its implications—are the subject of this chapter.

18.1 Introduction

Chinese grand strategy has been a subject of intense study and debate ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.¹ With the world's largest population and the fourth largest land mass sharing a border with 14 states, China had a disproportionate impact on the world even before its rise. Today, China is the second largest economy, and the largest single contributor to world growth since the 2008 financial crisis. China also boasts the world's largest political party, a modern and growing military, and holds 45 top leadership

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positions in major international institutions. Given its large and growing political, military, and economic clout, scholars and policymakers alike are interested in what China wants and how it plans to achieve its goals—in other words, China's grand strategy.

'Grand strategy' refers to a comprehensive, long-term plan of essential actions by which a country intends to achieve its major objectives (see Box 18.1 for definitions). There is no single official document akin to the United States National Security Strategy that outlines China's grand strategy. China specialists rely on a combination of leadership statements and Chinese foreign policy behaviour to piece together an overarching picture of China's desired role in the world. By analysing the choices China makes, we can also derive key elements of Beijing's objectives and the political, military, and economic means it deems appropriate to pursue those objectives.

The main objective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is to perpetuate CCP rule by consolidating and maintaining authority over mainland China. The CCP has determined that the best way to achieve legitimacy is to deliver on key promises to the Chinese people. Originally, economic growth was the central deliverable, but combating corruption, minimizing inequality, and mitigating environmental damage have become increasingly important to the Chinese public. To maintain domestic social and political stability, Xi Jinping has promised balanced, continued economic development in his China Dream (see Section 18.3). Protecting Chinese 'core interests'—an evolving term China uses to describe the non-negotiable bottom lines of policies such as maintaining its CCP-led political system, and defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity—has always been an important source of CCP legitimacy. Under Xi, China has more resolutely resisted any perceived challenges to these core interests by actively and aggressively consolidating CCP power in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet while pushing for more control over areas still in dispute such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and East China Sea.

Protecting Chinese overseas interests has increasingly become a part of China's grand strategy. Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2016) captured the scope of China's overseas activities, noting that there are 30,000 global Chinese businesses and over 100 million Chinese citizens

BOX 18.1 Definitions

Definitions of Grand Strategy

Scholars of Chinese politics adopt many different definitions of grand strategy. Avery Goldstein posits that it is 'the combination of political-diplomatic, economic, and military means that a state embraces to ensure its vital interests and pursue its goals—at minimum, its survival—in a potentially dangerous world' (Goldstein 2020: 166). A defining feature of grand strategy is 'its broad scope as an overarching vision about a regime's top priorities and how they can be met by drawing on the various policy instruments at its disposal' (Goldstein 2020: 167).

Andrew Scobell and Zhu Feng (2009) highlight grand strategy as a process 'by which a state relates long-term ends to means under the rubric of an overarching and enduring vision to advance the national interest'. Nadège Rolland adds that a country's grand strategy 'reflects the vision that a state has for itself and for its desired position in the international system' (Hart et al. 2017: 5).

Wang Jisi (2011), a leading international relations thinker in China, writes, 'any country's grand strategy must answer at least three questions: What are the nation's core interests? What external forces threaten them? And what can the national leadership do to safeguard them?'

who travel abroad each year. Similarly, McKinsey reports that Chinese travel abroad has risen 13 per cent each year since 2010, reaching 150 million in 2018 (Woetzal et al. 2019). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, China's outward direct investment increased in 2020, totalling \$132.9 billion, up 3.3 per cent year on year (EY Greater China 2021). Accordingly, China's defence umbrella has broadened. The 2019 Chinese defence white paper articulates that: 'China's armed forces will fulfill their international responsibilities ... [and] provide more public security goods to the international community to the best of their capacity' (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2019).

While there is a consensus on these components of China's grand strategy, scholars have characterized and categorized the overarching framework differently. Avery Goldstein (2020), for example, articulates the main distinction as a focus on political survival of the regime before 1994, and the goal of regaining its standing as a major power through strategies of rejuvenation thereafter. A 2020 RAND report argues that China has had four successive grand strategies since 1949: revolution (1949–77), recovery (1978–89), building comprehensive national power (CNP) (1990–2003), and rejuvenation (2004–present) (Scobell et al. 2020: 11). Regardless of how its grand strategy is categorized, China has been using its growing power to reduce US economic access to the region, the US military's freedom to manoeuvre, the privileged political relationships the United States has enjoyed with most countries in the region, and the role of US-led international regimes in the region such as its Asia hub-and-spokes alliance system (Swaine and Tellis 2000: 5).

This chapter briefly covers the history of Chinese grand strategy since 1949 before focusing most heavily on China's strategy of rejuvenation under Xi Jinping. It also covers some of the domestic factors that have influenced Chinese grand strategy over time. It then highlights two components central to China's grand strategy—its approach to international institutions and its maritime ambitions. The chapter ends with a discussion of the United States shift to great power competition with China.

18.2 The History of Chinese Grand Strategy

18.2.1 Mao Era

After more than two decades of civil war, part of which overlapped with Chinese involvement in the Second World War, the CCP gained control over China in 1949. But the perceived threats to the regime did not end with the civil war. For the first four decades of the CCP's rule, its leadership was primarily focused on regime survival. Initially, the greatest external threat to the CCP was the United States, which had supported the Kuomintang, the CCP's opposition in the civil war. Mao Zedong believed that aligning the new China, a weak and poor country, with the Soviet Union would deter a direct US military attack and more coercive and subversive attempts to undermine the Party's hold on power. Additionally, China hoped the Soviet Union, the first socialist state, would provide development assistance in the form of money, equipment, and know-how.

But the relationship between the Soviet Union and China was a complicated one from the beginning. During the Korean War, Mao expressed frustration that promised Soviet military assistance never arrived. A few years later, during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, the Soviet Union seemed to take India's side. By 1969, the Sino-Soviet bilateral relationship had soured