OXFORD

STRATEGY
IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

John Baylis | James J. Wirtz | Jeannie L. Johnson | Danielle F. S. Cohen



eighth edition

Strategy in the Contemporary World

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Edited by

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Chinese grand strategy

Oriana Skylar Mastro

Reader's Guide

The rise of China from an impoverished, 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, particularly 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.

20.1 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 second largest population—surpassed by India in 2023—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 global financial crisis. China also boasts the world's largest political party, a modern and growing military, and holds 42 top leadership positions in major international institutions (US–China Economic and Security Review Commission 2024). 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 20.1**). 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.

BOX 20.1

Definitions

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: 166).

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 20.3**). 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. In 2020, the number of outbound Chinese tourists dropped to around 20.3 million due to the coronavirus pandemic, but this number rebounded to over 87 million in 2023 after border restrictions were lifted (Statista 2024). China's outward direct investment reached USD 147.9 billion in 2023, marking a 0.9 per cent year-on-year increase (EY Greater China 2024). 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', reflecting China's articulation of a growing responsibility to the international community (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. Rush Doshi (2021) argues that since the end of the Cold War, China has strategically aimed to displace the US-led order, first regionally and later globally. He categorizes Chinese grand strategy into three phases—blunting, building, and expanding—each closely linked to the United States' relative power and influencing Beijing's military, political, and economic actions. Mastro (2024) examines the factors behind China's rise, revealing how China's 'upstart' strategy of emulation, exploitation, and entrepreneurship on the international stage enabled it to become a global power without provoking a strong international backlash. 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 US shift to great power competition with China.

[1] The author would like to thank Emily Carr, Joshua Goodwin, Hrishita Badu, and Isabel Cai for their expert research assistance.

20.2 The History of Chinese Grand Strategy

20.2.1 The 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, which was in a weaken and impoverished state, 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. By 1969, the Sino-Soviet bilateral relationship had soured to the point that a skirmish erupted in a disputed area of their border. Their estrangement, which became known as the Sino-Soviet split, demanded a rethinking of Chinese grand strategy. With the Soviet Union now the primary threat, Mao pursued an alignment with the United States. He described the evolution of his grand strategic approach as 'lean to one side, lean to the other'. This phrase captured Mao's shift from seeking military backing and economic assistance from the Soviet Union to the United States. Thus, even during China's most ideological period, practical concerns about threats to the regime dominated grand strategy considerations and decisions.

20.2.2 The Deng Era

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, he continued Mao's grand strategic focus on alignment with the United States to counter the Soviet threat. But his goals moved beyond survival to China's economic growth and development. One year after taking power, he officially launched the 'reform and opening up', which loosened state control to facilitate private commercial and entrepreneurial activity. Once an isolated country, China sought relationships with countries outside its borders to promote trade and, thus, economic growth. A necessary first step was the normalization of relations with the United States in 1979. Deng hoped that China's alignment with the United States would bring not only military assistance but also greater economic and technological cooperation that could boost China's economic revival.

But Deng Xiaoping also understood that, if not done carefully, rebuilding Chinese wealth and power could create an international backlash that would undermine these efforts. Additionally, China was re-entering the international stage at a time when other countries, especially communist ones, were collapsing all around the world. Deng was thus intent not only on prioritizing China's economic development for the sake of the Party's internal legitimacy but also on rebuilding its power on the international stage. It is notable that of Deng's Four Modernizations—agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence—defence was deliberately listed last. Deng's 24-character strategy, which was circulated to Party officials in the summer of 1991, set out that China should: observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.

20.2.3 The Jiang and Hu Eras

Maintaining a benign strategic environment has always been considered a necessary condition for China's rise, but its importance spiked as China became richer and more powerful militarily. After 15 years of reform, China's economy had grown from roughly USD 150 billion in 1978 to USD 735 billion in 1995, according to World Bank estimates. At this moment, a crisis erupted across the Taiwan Strait. The PRC conducted a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait in response to a politically charged speech delivered by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui at his alma mater, Cornell University.

Jiang Zemin, who assumed the Chinese presidency in 1993, took the reins of China's rise, but had to double down on trying to reassure others that China's rise was an opportunity, not a threat. In a 1999 speech, Jiang put forth a new security concept which called for (i) non-interference in internal affairs based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence; (ii) strengthening economic cooperation, joint prosperity, and the reduction of gaps between countries; and (iii) peace and security based on dialogue, cooperation, mutual understanding, and peaceful resolution of interstate disputes. Believing that the current period of relative peace was a strategic opportunity, China sought to position itself as a major regional power through deepening ties with its neighbours. The goal was partly to undermine the United States' alliance system in Asia and, thus, the role of the US military there. China's foreign policy was to be focused on reassuring China's neighbours and strengthening ties with great powers in a more proactive, deliberate way.

For the 15 years that followed, first under Jiang and then under his successor Hu Jintao, China became more involved and integrated in the international community as part of the grand strategy to reassure. China embraced multilateralism, gaining membership to over 50 intergovernmental organizations and joining nearly 1,250 international non-governmental organizations by 2000 (Kent 2013: 133). China founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 along with Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with the goal of ensuring Eurasian security and stability, and took a lead role in trying to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In 1997, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) announced 'a twenty-first century-oriented partnership of good neighbourliness and mutual trust' at the first informal ASEAN–China summit. Beijing finally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, which propelled its economic integration further. The results were astonishing—between 1986 and 2016, trade between the United States and China increased more than 30-fold. The goal was to stress China's desire to create a benign environment for its 'peaceful rise', a term first used in 2003 in the Hu era (though the next year, Chinese leaders changed the slogan to 'peaceful development', concerned that 'rise' would heighten concerns and threat perceptions in capitals around the world).

To further help improve its image, the CCP announced in 2007 its intention to pursue soft power as 'an important component of comprehensive national power and international competitiveness' (PRC, Central People's Government 2007). In the mid-1990s, China also began to form strategic partnerships with countries to strengthen ties and foster the emergence of a multipolar system. Strategic partnerships are 'structured collaboration(s) between states (or other "actors") to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation' (Wilkins 2008: 363). By 2014, China had strategic partnerships with 47 countries and 3 international organizations; by 2020, that number had risen to 112 countries (Xinhua News Agency 2020).

Even China's military became more active in the international community, partially in response to then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's (2005) call for China to become a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system by helping with objectives like ensuring North Korean compliance and assisting the United States in fighting terrorism. Only a year earlier, in 2004, Hu had articulated an international role for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for the first time in the 'New Historic Missions', which specified that the PLA should help preserve world peace and promote common development. In 2008, China dispatched its navy beyond the region to participate in the multinational anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden. After decades of dismissing the United Nations (UN) as a tool of hegemonic power, China became the top contributor of troops to peacekeeping missions out of the permanent five members of the Security Council in 2009.

China has tried to present its growing military power as an opportunity and strategic benefit for the world, while simultaneously becoming more vocal in its criticism of the US military presence in Asia. China became much more confident about using military tools to promote more ambitious grand strategic goals as its military became more and more capable. The reassurance strategy initially seemed to work as China built power throughout the 2000s without experiencing the degree of pushback that seemed forthcoming after the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis. But in 2009, China became more assertive in promoting its claims in several maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas (see **Box 20.2**). In the 2020s, China has also escalated its military intimidation of Taiwan—using frequent air incursions, aggressive propaganda, and simulated attacks to coerce submission, increasing regional tensions and raising fears of conflict. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to avoid scrutiny and, at times, concern of the international community.

BOX 20.2

Case Study

China's Maritime Disputes

China has several maritime disputes with its neighbours in the South China Sea and East China Sea. In the South China Sea, there are three primary contested island groups: the Paracels, the Spratlys, and Scarborough Shoal. The Paracel Islands are contested by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam and occupied by China. The Spratly Islands are disputed to varying degrees among China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with Vietnam controlling the greatest number. Finally, Scarborough Shoal is claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines. In 2012, the Philippines and China clashed when a Philippine warship faced off against Chinese fishing boats in Scarborough Shoal near the Spratly Islands. A two-month stand-off followed, in which China sought to bar Philippine fishing boats from the waters and began a bout of economic coercion that included barring tourism to and fruit purchases from the Philippines. In March 2021, China deployed 200 ships, which it claimed to be 'fishing fleets', to the Whitsun Reef, part of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (CFR 2024a). In June 2024, tensions in the South China Sea escalated as the Chinese Coast Guard attacked a Filipino rubber boat with axes and other sharp tools, an act that Manila described as a 'brazen act of aggression'. During this clash, a Philippine Navy sailor reported losing a thumb after a Chinese vessel intentionally rammed into his boat (South China Morning Post 2024). China now occupies Scarborough Shoal. In the East China Sea, China, Taiwan, and Japan all claim the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are controlled by Japan. The US position is in line with the 2016 Hague tribunal ruling, declaring most of China's South China Sea claims as illegal.

Key Points

- Mao's grand strategy of aligning with the Soviet Union and then the United States, called 'lean to one side, lean to the other', was primarily designed to deal with existential threats to the Chinese communist regime.
- Deng Xiaoping launched China's economic reforms with the goal of helping China build the power and wealth necessary to one day be a player on the international stage. But he was cautious in his approach, and his 'hide-and-bide' strategy called for China to lie low and join the existing order.
- Jiang Zemin, who was in power from 1990 to 2003, continued Deng's legacy. But as China's economic power grew, the necessity to reassure countries of China's peaceful intentions dominated China's grand strategy. Both Jiang and his successor, Hu Jintao, focused on reassuring countries through discourse, prioritizing relations with major powers, and integrating China into the international order.
- As Chinese economic and military clout grew and China became more assertive in a series of ongoing maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas, it became increasingly difficult to avoid the scrutiny, and at times concern, of the international community.

20.3 Chinese Grand Strategy in the Xi Jinping Era

After Xi's ascension in 2012, it quickly became apparent that he was a different type of leader from his predecessors. First, he consolidated power faster, assuming the position of Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) almost immediately, despite it being customary for the previous leader to maintain that post for an additional two years. He also launched an anti-corruption campaign to weed out his rivals, leading many observers to conclude that he was not first among equals in the Politburo but was, in fact, dominant.

Xi's grand strategy was, in some ways, equally surprising and ambitious. He gave a series of speeches laying out his agenda, which called for a greater international role for China and was more direct about achieving China's unimpeded rise or what he referred to as achieving the China Dream of 'the great rejuvenation of the nation'. The China Dream is largely a domestic vision comprised of four components: strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, militarily), civilized China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals), harmonious China (amity among social classes), and beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution). The idea is that without a strong, stable, and powerful domestic base, China cannot hope to achieve its goals on the world stage.

Xi also set forth benchmarks for how the population, and international community, could gauge the success or failure of the strategy. Xi's foreign policy of 'striving for achievement' for the 'New Era' presented a comprehensive strategy to guide the PRC towards national rejuvenation with two significant centenary goals: achieving a 'moderately prosperous society' by 2021 (the CCP's centenary) and transforming into a 'socialist modern country' by 2049 (the PRC's centenary). Broadly, these goals signify China's aspirations to rank among the top countries globally in terms of its economy and military (Chang and Cheng 2014). To bridge these milestones, Xi proposed a two-phase modernization plan with interim goals for 2035 to achieve the 2049 target of transforming China into a 'great modern socialist country'. On 1 July 2021, during the CCP's hundredth anniversary, he announced that China had achieved its goal of becoming a 'moderately prosperous society'. By 2035, China plans to boost its economic and technological prowess, aiming to become a 'global leader in innovation' and develop a 'world-class' military, envisioned to match or exceed that of the United States and other major powers.

20.3.1 Military Aspects of Xi's Grand Strategy

A strong military, specifically one prepared to fight and win local wars, is a critical component of Xi's grand strategy of national rejuvenation (Ren 2017). In 2013, Xi launched one of the largest military reform programmes in China's history, which resulted in major restructuring of the military, including increased focuses on cyber, space, electronic warfare, and nuclear and conventional missile capabilities.

Meanwhile, Chinese defence spending grew for the twenty-fourth consecutive year in 2018, making China the second largest defence spender after the United States (Tian et al. 2019). China dedicated USD 296.8 billion in 2023 to defence spending, one of the largest increases to date (China Power Team 2026). As the PLA advances its modernization, a decrease in active-duty personnel has allowed a larger portion of China's defence budget to be allocated for military research and development (R&D), the space programme, and defence mobilization. These efforts have resulted in more frequent, sophisticated, and multifaceted PLA presence and activities in the region and beyond. China's main line of effort remains centred on East Asia, and its concerns are focused on the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and Taiwan (see **Box 20.2**).

PLA hardware modernization, doctrinal development, organizational reforms, force structure, and training all make abundantly clear that operations to invade and occupy Taiwan are the PLA's driving force (see **Critical Thinking**). Xi's restructuring of the PLA has focused on capabilities such as joint operations needed for armed unification and pushed risky reforms to make sure the PLA could fight and win in modern warfare. In 2024, China reorganized the Strategic Support Force, a military branch Xi created in 2015, into the Aerospace, Cyberspace, and Information Support Forces, likely to increase Xi's control over essential logistics and information domains (Arthur 2024). Meanwhile, Xi's rhetoric on Taiwan has become more assertive. At the CCP's Twentieth Party Congress in 2022, Xi pledged that China 'will never promise to renounce the use of force'; the Chinese Foreign Ministry has stated that options aside from peaceful reunification are on the table.

Changes have occurred not only in capabilities and rhetoric but also in behaviour. When the former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, Beijing retaliated not only with sanctions and bans on over 100 Taiwanese products but also with large-scale military exercises that involved extensive air and naval exercises around Taiwan and in Japan's EEZ, as well as a simulation of a military blockade of the island. Since then, heightened PLA activity in the vicinity of Taiwan has become the norm. In August 2022, a record 450 Chinese military aircraft entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), the highest monthly total recorded. The second highest, 259 in April 2023, coincided with Tsai's meeting with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California. After Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te criticized China's military actions, tensions escalated, leading to China's May 2024 military exercises simulating a 'full-scale armed invasion of Taiwan', including the outlying islands and approaching Taiwan's 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone (Ng and Wingfield-Hayes 2024).

CRITICAL THINKING

China will use force against Taiwan during Xi Jinping's tenure

For

- ***Xi has staked his legacy on 'reunification' with Taiwan***. In 2017, Xi stated that 'complete national reunification' is essential for China's rejuvenation and warned that political division across the Strait cannot continue indefinitely (Mazza 2018). In 2022, Xi maintained that China 'will never promise to give up the use of force and reserve[s] the option to take all necessary measures'—a stance reaffirmed in October 2024 (Xinhua News Agency 2024a).
- ***China's policy of 'peaceful reunification' is not working***. Taiwanese identification with the mainland is waning, with only about 6.9 per cent of those surveyed in 2024 wanting to unify with the PRC (Election Study Center, National Chengchi University 2025). Other trends—including the depletion of Kuomintang influence, the rise of Democratic Progressive Party politicians (who appear even less cautious), and a stronger Taiwanese identity—confirm Beijing's worst fears: prospects for peaceful reunification are shrinking.
- ***The prospects of a successful military operation have increased significantly over the past 25 years***. Chinese military modernization—hardware, doctrinal development, organizational reforms, force structure, and training—has prioritized developing capabilities to invade and occupy Taiwan. Xi has restructured the PLA to facilitate the joint operations required for an armed reunification. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director William Burns reported in 2023 that US intelligence shows that Xi has instructed the military to 'be ready by 2027' to invade Taiwan (CBS News 2023).
- ***It is 'peak China', and the window of opportunity is closing***. China's economic boom may be short-lived due to structural inefficiencies, heavy reliance on exports, and unsustainable growth practices, possibly nearing its economic peak compared to the United States, pushing Xi towards decisive action on Taiwan (Brands and Beckley 2021). With Taiwanese President Lai thanking supporters 'for refusing to be swayed by external forces', Beijing fears Taiwan is moving towards independence and that the opportunity to reverse this course is closing.

Against

- ***Chinese leaders are still adhering to peaceful reunification and officially state that it is working***. During an October 2024 trip to Fujian, the Chinese province directly across the Strait, Xi emphasized expanding cultural exchanges and called for 'enhancing the sense of the Chinese national and cultural identity among Taiwan compatriots' (Xinhua News Agency 2024b).
- ***Attacking Taiwan could mean major war with the United States***. The enormity of both military and economic cost is prohibitively high. It could jeopardize Chinese rejuvenation and damage China's international image, deterring Beijing from using force unless Taipei declares outright independence.
- ***The balance of power will favour China over time***. China reported that its economy grew during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–23, positioning it to potentially overtake the United States as the world's largest economy sooner than projected. Similarly, China's navy has become the largest globally.[2] Therefore, there is no urgency and China is better off waiting.

Questions

1. What would be the global impact of a conflict over Taiwan?
2. Should the United States intervene in defence of Taiwan?
3. What is the best way to ensure peace and stability in Asia despite conflicting interests?

While China continues to eschew formal alliances, its military relationship with Russia has expanded and deepened, especially since 2016. In 2001, the two countries signed the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation (renewed in 2021), which is in essence a non-aggression pact that commits both sides to support for each other on fundamental issues and strengthens cooperation in the international arena. Russia has transferred over USD 30 billion worth of arms and military technology to China since 1991, with Moscow providing more sophisticated and sensitive weapons in recent years (Schwartz 2015). Although China does not officially supply arms to Russia for its conflict in Ukraine, China allows the export of many dual-use and commercial products. From March 2022 to 2023, Chinese companies shipped drones and drone components valued at over USD 12 million to Russia. Furthermore, China buys Russian oil and gas, which helps stabilize Russia's economy.

The two sides are even engaged in the joint development of missile defence systems. Joint military exercises have expanded in scope and frequency to include more realistic combat scenarios such as anti-ship, anti-submarine, and air defence operations. China sent anti-submarine aircraft and heavy destroyers to maritime exercises for the first time during Joint Sea 2021, and the two countries tested their ability to strike sea-based targets (Mastro 2024). Participating in national military exercises is increasingly viewed as an indicator of close alignment between nations. One example is Vostok-2018, the largest Russian exercise held since 1981, to which China sent a contingent of 3,500 people and 900 armoured vehicles, enhancing readiness for potential Korean peninsula contingencies. Russia's arms sales have also contributed significantly to China's military might, mainly to its anti-access area denial capability against the United States (Heath 2016). The two sides now have multiple series of annual or biannual exercises, such as the 'Joint Sea' naval drills that have significantly enhanced Chinese amphibious capabilities and the multilateral SCO 'Peace Mission' exercises (Meick 2017).

20.3.2 Reassurance Aspects of Xi's Grand Strategy

But China has not abandoned the reassurance strand of its grand strategy. Xi continues to argue that China's rise will benefit the rest of the world, particularly regional states. After coming to power, Xi used the term 'a community for a shared destiny' to reflect an approach to international relations based on the accumulation of Xi's ideas on reforming and improving the existing international order, particularly after 2018 (Fu 2017). At the 2023 Belt and Road Forum, a few months after securing his third term, Xi stated that China would 'make relentless efforts to achieve modernization for all countries' and work to build a 'shared future for mankind' (McCarthy 2023). This model of international relations is posited as an alternative approach that supersedes the Western approach and its accompanying components—democracy and human rights promotion, arming and allying with other countries—behaviours China refers to as hegemonic, zero-sum power politics exemplifying unilateralism. 'Shared (also translated as common) destiny' differs from this in that it is premised on 'win–win' relations rather than 'zero-sum' thinking and power politics. As one commentator clarifies, China is not against the liberal order but hopes to improve it so that it becomes more harmonious and inclusive (Wang 2019).

In the early days of Xi's reign, China also pushed for a new formulation for US–China relations, a 'new type of major power relations', which stresses conflict avoidance but also mutual accommodation of core interests. In meetings with President Barack Obama, Xi frequently used this phrase to suggest that the United States and China should treat each other as equals. The sticking point for the United States was China's vague definition of its core interests, fuelling US suspicions of potential conflicts with its own and its allies' interests (Perlez 2014).

Xi launched his flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also referred to as One Belt, One Road, in 2013 to mobilize all national resources for the purpose of shaping the international environment in ways that favour Beijing. On the surface, China provides loans and other assistance for a multi-continent infrastructure project that includes an overland Silk Road Economic Belt, a Maritime Silk Road, and a Digital Silk Road. As of May 2025, about 150 countries had signed on to the BRI (Nedopil 2025b). The BRI is massive in scale, with over 3,100 projects undertaken since 2019 (Xue 2023). The total investment has already surpassed USD 1.3 trillion, which includes approximately USD 775 billion in construction contracts and USD 533 billion in non-financial investments (Nedopil 2025a: 6). Some predict that China's spending on the BRI could reach up to USD 8 trillion. While there are reasons to question these statistics, Chinese investment abroad still rivals that of major non-governmental organizations. China is rapidly catching up to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in emergency financing, providing USD 240 billion in recent years (Bradsher 2023). In 2021, China's loans to distressed countries rose to USD 40.5 billion from USD 10 billion in 2014, while the IMF's lending remained relatively stable at about USD 68.6 billion, except for a pandemic-related increase in 2020 (AidData 2023). Xi's global reassurance strategy has not prevented strains in US–China relations. An important case in point is US export controls on quantum computers and semiconductor-manufacturing equipment due to concerns about their use by rivals, especially China. Biden maintained tariffs originating in the first Trump administration on various Chinese exports and imposed new bans on exporting advanced semiconductors and related equipment citing security reasons; the United States urged allies to similarly restrict China's access to this technology. During discussions in San Francisco, China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao voiced concerns to US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo about US semiconductor export restrictions, sanctions on Chinese firms, and tariffs (Cash 2023). In July 2025, the *Financial Times* reported that the United States had paused export restrictions on Nvidia's H20 chips while the second Trump administration negotiated a trade deal with China (Sevastopulo 2025).

Key Points

- Xi Jinping has focused his efforts on finally regaining China's international standing as a great power. National rejuvenation, which includes fulfilling the China Dream, is a key component of his grand strategy.
- China's military modernization has moved centre stage, heightening concerns about China's ultimate goals and intentions.
- Xi has prioritized accumulating and exercising China's new-found power to promote its interests over reassuring countries of the peaceful nature of Chinese intentions.
- Nevertheless, Xi has sought to reassure countries of the benefits of China's rise through both its economic assistance programme (the BRI) and by calling for a community of common destiny, a strategy that has not prevented friction with the United States.

[3] Although analysts dispute how meaningful such a metric is.

20.4 Domestic Determinants of Chinese Grand Strategy

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of external threats and opportunities have played a large role in shaping what Chinese leaders want and how they have tried to achieve their goals over the past 70 years. China's history, domestic political system, and relationship with the United States continue to significantly influence Chinese thinking.

But there are also several domestic and ideational factors (ideas Chinese leaders hold about themselves and the world) that have influenced the course of Chinese grand strategy. For example, Chinese leaders' desire to regain their international standing as a great power was present long before Xi came onto the stage. For most of world history, China was the dominant economic, political, cultural, and military power in Asia. This creates the basis for the rejuvenation strategy of *returning* to its status as a major power. Moreover, the CCP now often ties contemporary initiatives to China's imperial past, given the attractiveness and uniqueness of that culture, and uses this history to pursue its territorial claims.

However, it is not only the narrative of China's previous greatness that serves to motivate grand strategic thinking but also historical memories of China's downfall. China remembers keenly its more recent history of subjugation by Western and Japanese powers, which fuels a desire for international recognition. Indeed, Party leaders often refer to 'the century of humiliation' when arguing for continued Communist Party rule, claiming it was the arrival of the communists that brought that era to a close. As Mao proclaimed, on the founding of the CCP, 'we have stood up'. Fear that foreign powers will try to exploit China again, especially if it seems internally weak due to factors such as social instability, separatist movements, or Party in-fighting, colours much of China's strategy.

The degree of internal stability also impacts what China tries to accomplish on the global stage. China specialists concur that if Party rule or control over territory were seriously threatened, China would focus inwards. Coupled with the fact that protecting Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty from foreign exploitation is central to the CCP's legitimacy, blunting international attempts to shape what the government does at home is a key driver of China's strategy.

The safety of China's economic 'lifelines' (i.e. trade and energy routes) is a main security concern for China. Over half of China's crude oil imports come from the Middle East via the Malacca Strait. These imports are projected to double by 2035, increasing the threat of a stranglehold on China's energy route. In 2021, China's crude oil imports from Gulf countries near the Strait of Hormuz reached USD 128 billion, tripling the combined imports of the United States and EU (Funaiole, Hart, and McElwee 2023). Since 2019, the Power of Siberia Pipeline has supplied natural gas from eastern Russia to China, offering an alternative to liquid natural gas flows through the Strait of Malacca (US Energy Information Administration 2024). The BRI, China's maritime strategy, and its attempts to protect resource-rich countries from external sanctions can all be understood as connected to China's desire to maintain access to energy resources.

Key Points

- Domestic political and ideational factors have impacted the contours of Chinese grand strategy over time.
- China was the dominant economic, political, and military power in Asia for most of modern history, which has created a national narrative that China's rightful place is at the top.
- The 'century of humiliation' in which China was exploited by foreign powers has driven strategies of survival and of rejuvenation.
- Concerns about internal stability and energy security shape what China wants to achieve and how it tries to achieve its goals.

20.5 China in International Institutions

The degree to which China is a revisionist power and poses a challenge to the US-led rules-based international order is a central debate about Chinese grand strategy.[3] Alastair Iain Johnston argued in 2003 that China was largely a status quo power because it had joined most international institutions, proposed very few new rules within them, and was not attempting to undermine US alliances, among other indicators (Johnston 2003). But by 2019, Johnston's position on China's challenge to the international order had slightly changed, and he argued that it was apparent that China's preferred rules and norms at times conflict with those of the United States and its allies (Johnston 2019). Stacie Goddard distinguishes four types of revisionist states, depending on their interaction with international institutions. She argues that these states' position in the system determines their material and cultural resources and, thus, which strategy they pursue. In this framework, China is a 'bridging revisionist' state, seeking deep changes in the existing order without trying to overthrow it or exit from it (Goddard 2018).

On the one hand, China greatly benefits from the international order. As a member of the permanent five with veto power, China has gained significant power over international security from its participation in the UN Security Council. In fiscal year 2024 alone, China received a loan of USD 1.05 billion for advancement in renewable and low-carbon energy and other development efforts (World Bank Group 2024).

On the other hand, China has undermined aspects of the liberal world order by shaping norms and rules in its favour and blunting tools of liberal influence. For example, China protects regimes with ongoing human rights violations such as North Korea, Russia, Myanmar, Sudan, and Zimbabwe from international pressure. China exports surveillance technology, which countries can use to control and suppress their populations. The Chinese company Huawei, the largest provider of 'safe city solutions', claims to have implemented its technology in over 700 cities across 100 countries (Greitens 2020). The 2022 US National Security Strategy labels China as a 'competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective' (The White House 2022: 8). Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state during the Biden administration, recognized China as the primary long-term challenge to the international order, even amid global concerns like Putin's war in Ukraine (Blinken 2022).

While China has not sought to completely overturn the international order, it has tried to undermine aspects that the Party finds threatening to its regime survival. For example, in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), China has used its position to shield itself from criticism about its domestic human rights violations and to change norms surrounding transparency and accountability in dealing with human rights violations in other countries. Also, China has blocked the accreditation of certain non-governmental organizations that criticize or investigate human rights violations. Beijing repurposes institutions for its own strategic ends—for example, it uses Interpol's 'red notice' system to track down dissidents.

Under Xi, part of China's grand strategy has been to change the rules of institutions to gain a greater official say in their activities and decisions. China has sought to rewrite the rules in institutions like the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, increasing its voting power to be commensurate with its economic stature. For example, during the 2001–09 WTO Doha development rounds, China led developing countries in demanding better trade deals for developing nations worldwide (Heidrich 2009). China also fought to change the renminbi's designation in the IMF, leading to its quota share, and thus its influence, increasing from 4 per cent to 6.41 per cent (IMF Executive Board 2021). When unable to gain sufficient influence, China has created its own institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016. China also uses the BRICS coalition—consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, plus new members—to press for reforms in global governance. However, the impact of these initiatives has been more symbolic than substantive. China has also sought to establish new standards, rules, norms, and processes to gain a competitive advantage where the established order is weak, ambiguous, or non-existent.

In the cyber realm, China pushes 'cyber sovereignty' by advocating that states primarily govern cyberspace and control content within their borders, in contrast to the US preference for a multilateral approach involving non-state, civilian actors. To shift the norm in its preferred direction, China has challenged US-led norm-building in the UN Group of Governmental Experts (the main norm-setting body for Western governments in cyberspace) and has held its own annual World Internet Conference in Wuzhen since 2014. To further advance the Chinese approach, China interprets US concerns about foreign interference on social media as alignment with China's cyber sovereignty concept (Cary 2023).

China has also posited some new frameworks and organizing principles for international politics. The Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) are emblematic of China's strategy to offer alternatives to existing Western-dominated international institutions. The GSI, created in 2023, seeks to 'promote the docking of security concepts through equal consultation' and has gained support from over 100 countries and organizations (China Institute of International Studies 2024). It outlines 20 key cooperation directions, including global arms control, addressing international crises like Ukraine, and regional security cooperation centred on ASEAN, alongside cooperation platforms such as the SCO and the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2024). However, not much concrete action has been done since the initiative's inception.

The GDI, created in 2021, aims to 'promote stronger, greener, and healthier global development', allegedly in alignment with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to 'build a global community of shared future for development' (Xi 2021). It envisions development as 'people-centric', 'inclusive', 'innovation driven', and 'harmonious with nature' (Xi 2021). At the 2023 BRICS Leaders' Dialogue, China pledged USD 10 billion for GDI implementation (Zhang 2024). The GDI aligns with efforts like the BRI to enhance China's leadership in the Global South.

The GCI promotes cultural exchange and mutual understanding, with Xi highlighting China's commitment to respecting sovereignty and diversity: 'We must uphold the principle of independence and explore diversified paths toward modernization' (Xi 2023). Like the GDI, the GCI also targets developing nations, emphasizing that 'modernization is not "an exclusive patent" of a small handful of countries' (PRC, Central People's Government 2023).

Key Points

- China has been more forward leaning on shaping international institutions to facilitate its rise and protect its national interests.
- Xi has attempted to reform some institutions, undermine others, and build new ones.
- How Xi handles institutions has depended on the degree of international support for those institutions, their willingness to accommodate China's new-found power, and their ultimate political purpose.
- The GSI, GDI, and GCI not only reflect China's commitment to a proactive global role but also highlight its desire to project soft power and reform global norms in line with its national interests.

[3] This section contains material by the author from a 2019 presentation to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Mastro 2019).

20.6 China's Contemporary Maritime Strategy

China's increased assertiveness and militarization of its maritime claims under Xi suggest that Chinese maritime strategy is central to Xi's strategy of rejuvenation (see **Section 20.3**).[4] The South China Sea and East China Sea—which China refers to as its 'near seas' and US strategists often refer to as the 'first island chain'—are key theatres of competition, where China relies heavily on economic, diplomatic, and legal tools to promote its goals (see **Box 20.2**). For example, after a Chinese trawler collided with two Japanese coast guard vessels near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the crew was arrested, China responded with economic coercion against Japan.

On the diplomatic side, China has been negotiating a code of conduct (COC) with ASEAN members for over two decades to manage the South China Sea disputes. From 2016, a new round of discussion on a potential COC gained momentum, and in July 2023, a three-year timeline was established to accelerate the conclusion of the negotiations. However, there is scepticism about China's readiness to agree to a binding deal.

China also uses grey-zone tactics—activities that allow a country to stay below the threshold of overt military action to secure gains without provoking military responses by others. China relies mainly on its coastguard and maritime militia to advance its claims in the South China Sea because they are effective, low-cost, and less likely to prompt a strong response. In March 2024, China coast guard cutters used water cannons and rammed a Philippine resupply mission at a contested shoal, which injured four sailors and damaged two vessels (Lariosa 2024). The construction of artificial islands at Mischief, Fiery Cross, and Subi Reefs has provided China with increased territory in the South China Sea and created a platform on which to base missiles and surveillance technologies without sparking a strong US reaction. On Woody Island, China has stationed fighter jets, cruise missiles, and radar systems; China hosts twenty outposts on the Paracel Islands and seven on the Spratly Islands (CFR 2024b).

Finally, China attempts to create the guise of legitimacy for its maritime ambitions through lawfare, the manipulation and misapplication of law. For example, in the East China Sea, China established an ADIZ in 2013, the boundaries of which overlap with existing ADIZs belonging to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Green et al. 2017). **Table 20.1** summarizes how China legitimates its claims to approximately 80 per cent of the South China Sea. Beijing persists with these claims despite the 2016 Hague Tribunal ruling that rejected China's historic rights argument and found China guilty of violating international law in its interference with the Philippines.

TABLE 20.1 Chinese lawfare in the South China Sea

China's claims	International law, norms
Waters between islands and features' internal waters (features include rocks, reefs, and shoals); commercial transit requires PRC permission (claimed explicitly for the Paracel Islands)	Only very few island nations considered archipelagos have the right to treat islands as a group; this does not apply to disputed South China Sea islands
Territorial sea of 12 nautical miles measured from the outer perimeter of island groups; artificial islands and most features generate a territorial sea	Territorial sea measured from each island; most PRC-claimed features do not meet the standard for any rights under international law
Can regulate military activity within an EEZ	Can only regulate economic activity within an EEZ
Claims rights to 'historic waters' within the nine-dash line, a boundary China draws that includes the Paracel and Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal	The meaning of 'historic waters' is unclear has no legal basis and confers no rights

Source: Author.

While China has prioritized its near seas claims under Xi, its maritime ambitions have extended beyond the immediate region. Its 2019 defence white paper called for transforming the Chinese Navy from a near seas defence navy to a far seas protection navy, asserted that maritime interests are as important as territorial integrity, and highlighted maritime territorial disputes and cross-Strait tension as the most significant challenges to China's sovereignty (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2019).

Currently, China aims to operate in the Indian Ocean and beyond, but there are few indications that China aspires to prevent other countries from also operating there as it does in the near seas (though this is still a great source of debate). In these waters, China's ambitions are driven primarily by the desire to protect its strategic lines of communication and its economic and political interests (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2019: 14). With the advent of Xi's signature strategy of BRI, Chinese maritime ambitions extended to the Mediterranean as part of the Maritime Silk Road (National Development and Reform Commission 2017). Additionally, Chinese behaviour is driven by a need to protect the country's oil supply (see **Section 20.4**).

Key Points

- China claims sovereignty over almost the entirety of the South China Sea and East China Sea in addition to offshore islands and features there. China has become more aggressive in promoting these claims under Xi.
- China relies on a combination of economic, diplomatic, and legal tools to coerce other claimants and build legitimacy for its position.
- As Chinese military capabilities have improved, China has relied more heavily on military coercion as a tool, though Beijing prefers grey-zone activities, which keep the disputes below the threshold of conflict.
- Chinese military activities in the Indian Ocean have expanded considerably, causing many to question Chinese intentions in these far seas. However, China has yet to make any claims in these waters, and there are few indications that coercion will be its modus operandi in the Indian Ocean as it is in the near seas.

[4] This section contains information by the author from a 2020 Statement before the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Non-Proliferation on Chinese Maritime Ambitions (Mastro 2020).

20.7 Conclusion

Chinese grand strategy has evolved significantly since 1949, from a focus on survival to an emphasis on national rejuvenation. Under Xi, China has become more proactive and, in some cases, assertive on the global stage. Xi's grand strategy is most evident in his approach to the rules-based international order and maritime disputes. Both internal and external factors have shaped this trajectory, and both will determine whether China is successful at achieving its long-term goal of national rejuvenation. Externally, the tensions in the US–China relationship, now characterized by great power competition, promise to shape Chinese grand strategy moving forwards as Chinese leaders reassess their strengths, vulnerabilities, and the nature of the strategic environment. Internal instability or economic stagnation could also change the trajectory of China's grand strategy. The most likely scenario by 2050 is either an ascendant China, which has achieved many but not all the goals of its grand strategy, or a stagnant China, which has failed to achieve most of its long-term goals (Scobell et al. 2020). Other scholars believe that an imploding China which faces serious domestic political challenges that threaten the CCP regime is the most likely (Blumenthal 2020). Nevertheless, China is unlikely to jettison its current goal of achieving national rejuvenation—nor will it abandon Xi's preferred approach of reassurance, coupled with attempts to reform the international system and resistance to perceived violations of China's core interests, especially with respect to sovereignty and ongoing territorial and maritime disputes.

QUESTIONS

1. How have the approaches to grand strategy evolved among Chinese leaders from Mao to Xi, and what makes Xi's strategy fundamentally different?
2. What challenges and successes has China encountered in reassuring the international community about its peaceful rise?
3. How does the rise of China impact its relationships with the United States, its neighbours, developing countries, and the international system?
4. What are the primary factors shaping China's grand strategy, and how do they influence its actions in the international system?
5. Are there aspects of China's grand strategy that are uniquely 'Chinese', or does Beijing's grand strategy represent that of any rising power?

Check your understanding of this chapter with multiple-choice self-test questions.

FURTHER READING

R. Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) leverages CCP documents to argue that China seeks to undermine the US-led world order and displace the United States in its leadership role.

A. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011) provides an overview of how history impacts on grand strategy and how the United States can mitigate some of the challenges associated with China's rise.

A. I. Johnston, 'China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations', *International Security* **44**(2) (2019): 9–60 argues that China's degree of support for the international order varies greatly depending on the issue at hand.

O. S. Mastro, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024) argues that China builds power not only by emulating the United States but also by exploiting blind spots and pursuing new, entrepreneurial pathways to power.

M. D. Swaine and A. J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2000): 1–20 provides an early overview of China's grand strategy and the factors influencing its development.

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