DECODING CHINA DICTIONARY

2025 EDITION

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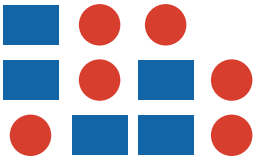

DECODING CHINA

The Decoding China Project is an independent non-profit research organisation established by a group of China specialists with extensive expertise in Chinese politics, law, media, international relations and development cooperation. Our team brings a wealth of academic and real-world experience from years of engagement with Chinese counterparts.

At the heart of our mission to strengthen China literacy is the Decoding China Dictionary. The Dictionary is an open access resource aimed at deepening understanding of how key terms in international relations are interpreted and utilised by the Chinese government and affiliated actors, and how that differs from their common understanding in the normative framework of the UN. The dictionary's content is authored and compiled by the founding members of the Decoding China Project, using original Chinese sources such as official statements, regulations, and policy plans, while referencing the work of leading scholars in the field.

You can access the Decoding China Dictionary for free as an online resource or download it in PDF format. Stay informed with our latest feature articles and analyses on our website: www.decodingchina.eu.

Your support is vital for us to be able to provide this resource. With your financial assistance, we can continue to develop and expand the dictionary, host events, and translate the dictionary into multiple languages, making it available to a wider audience.

If you are interested in supporting the project, commissioning research, funding printed copies, or inviting us for presentations and training sessions, please reach out at info@decodingchina.eu. We also welcome your feedback and suggestions for future editions, as we strive to grow and refine our offerings.

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Introduction

Decoding China's Political Discourse and Foreign Policy Narratives

Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen

> **"China is willing to work with all countries to promote the shared values of humanity—peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom. We will build consensus among people of different ethnicities, faiths, cultures, and regions and advocate for an equal and orderly multipolar world and a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalisation. Together, we will build our shared planet into a peaceful, harmonious, and congenial home."[1]**

Xi Jinping at meeting with foreign guests attending the China International Friendship Congress, 11 October 2024

This and similar statements from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader and China's president, Xi Jinping, promote an almost utopian global vision as part of a diplomatic drive to burnish China's image as a responsible great power.

Nearly half a century has passed since the start of the "opening up" era, which transformed an impoverished Chinese nation into the world's second-largest economy. China's current leadership has rolled back previous political reforms of cautious liberalisation, and separation of Party and state and is expanding its control over all aspects of society.[2] Under Xi, the Party is doubling down on efforts to achieve full modernisation through technological and scientific progress and demands a major role for China on the world stage as part of what Xi calls the country's "rejuvenation".[3]

China has long abandoned its previous foreign policy of "keeping a low profile and biding one's time". Instead, it has become a "norm entrepreneur" in the UN and other multilateral fora, in line with its economic and geopolitical clout.[4] As Xi Jinping has called for on numerous occasions since 2013, "Chinese values" and "solutions" should be promoted internationally. Beijing is on a mission to infuse international norms and principles, such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy, with new meaning.

Reining in Debates and Ensuring Ideological Security

While invoking international concepts of freedom, democracy, rule of law and human rights, China often uses these terms differently. Its conceptual framing, however, is no coincidence. It is the outcome of decades of coordinated initiatives by the Chinese leadership to build its own discourse power.[5] The influx of liberal values in the 1980s, such as democracy and human rights, was seen as a root cause of the student protests of 1989 and a threat to the survival of the CCP. China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping stated in 1989 that he considered insufficient ideological and political education to be the biggest reform failure of the 1980s.[6] But the long-term approach taken by the government was not the blanket repression of these terms, but rather their integration into the CCP's ideological canon and redefinition in a way that renders them harmless to its claim on power. From the early 1990s, new research institutes and organisations were founded and tasked with developing a Chinese discourse and perspective on core terms and concepts.

Language from international norms and standards continued to filter into official CCP language in what became known as the era of reform and opening that commenced in 1979 and lost impetus in the late 2000s to early 2010s. The reforms of that era laid the groundwork for China's accession to the WTO in 2001. Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 sparked hopes that a further convergence of values and systems would occur. And indeed, the term human rights was introduced in the Chinese Constitution in 2004, which initially was hailed as a new era of constitutional rights protection.[7]

Today democracy, freedom and rule of law are part of the canon of twelve core socialist values promoted under Xi Jinping since 2012, whose writings on human rights, diplomacy, security, and modernisation have been published in an ever-expanding canon of Xi Jinping Thought.[8] But over the past decade, measures to construct an independent Chinese value system have intensified, and liberal concepts have been almost completely redefined to make them compatible with the CCP's political and ideological system. *Document No. 9*,

issued by the Party leadership in 2012, was a mission statement to guard against constitutional democracy, universal values and civil society in their liberal sense.[9]

The concern that liberal or "Western" values are a threat to China's unity and political stability is equally reflected in a set of security-related laws and regulations introduced in the last decade, such as the *Hong Kong National Security Law*.[10] Propaganda efforts and legal codification of Party-defined norms have gone hand in hand with policy action such as increasing internet regulation and censorship, and criminal investigations and crackdowns on lawyers, rights activists and public intellectuals. A range of rules have curtailed activities of China's civil society organisations and restricted what can be discussed in academia, tightening the space for discussion and ideas within China. Since 2019, the Party is strengthening efforts to boost national identity and patriotism through education and public campaigns.

Not all government policy is repressive. China's leadership pursues a range of efforts to increase efficiency in public services, strengthen legal certainty in finance and trade, improve consumer rights, environmental protection, and AI safety. There are many areas of joint concern and overlapping interests with international stakeholders, including with Western states. But crucial differences remain and have in fact become more pronounced. Chinese leadership prioritises stability – as the collective interest of the "people" – over the rights of the individual, and uses this to legitimise repressive measures. For example, the crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong are routinely framed in terms of human rights protection and good governance.[11]

Today, the Party positions itself as the sole arbiter and defender of China's values and collective interests. But the evolution of many of the concepts within China also tells a story of contestation and differing views, challenging the framing that liberal or universal values are anathema to Chinese culture and citizens' aspirations. Chinese philosopher and diplomat Peng-Chun Chang, then Vice-Chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, played an instrumental role in the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.[12] From scholars and lawyers advocating for rule of law and government transparency in the 2000s, to protesters holding up signs demanding democracy and human rights in the White Paper protests in late 2022, there are many examples that the Party does not speak for all.

Even in the current environment, there are scholars who dare to speak truth to power and critique the government, despite the risks involved. Xu Zhangrun, a liberal constitutionalist, emerged as a critical voice against Xi Jinping's consolidation of power and the abuse of power in China's political system, particularly during the pandem-

ic. His 2020 essay "When Fury Overcomes Fear" led to his detention, subsequent dismissal from Tsinghua University, and a harsh isolation, effectively rendering him a social pariah.[13] More subtle academic and public debates occasionally emerge and even regain traction where commentators perceive windows of opportunity, for example, ahead of important political meetings or global events.[14]

Global Battle of Narratives: the Rise of Chinese Concepts

When foreign countries criticise China's domestic practices or international behaviour, diplomats often lament that "the West" misunderstands China. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of "telling China's story well" and boosting its voice in order to "create a favourable climate of international public opinion".[15] After reining in debates domestically in the early 2010s, the Chinese government now expends significant efforts on "external propaganda" promoting what it calls a "correct understanding" of China internationally.

The CCP seeks to strengthen China's influence in global governance and has identified increasing the country's international discourse power as key to achieving this goal. China's struggle for discourse power takes place both at the micro level in negotiations over specific words and formulations in treaties and resolutions, and at the macro level in competing narratives about the purpose and future of the international order.

Ideas and initiatives promoted by the Party have made their way into UN documents and international cooperation. In just over a decade, the "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure initiative has been rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and gained global prominence. China now regularly describes the BRI as a key pillar contributing to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Similarly, the concept of a "shared community of mankind" (人类命运共同体) and references to a "shared future" have risen from an obscure internal policy slogan to ubiquitous phrasing in China's policy statements that is regularly making its way into international declarations and bilateral statements. All new Chinese efforts are rhetorically framed as contributing to this overarching goal – a global community, where countries follow their own path, cooperate where desired, and refrain from criticising each other.[16]

Increasingly, normative ambitions are flanked by specific initiatives on a range of issues that are important to the Party. When the Global Data Security Initiative was introduced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2020, it was still relatively low profile. But in 2021, Xi Jinping announced

China's new Global Development Initiative at a UN General Assembly with much fanfare, a grand framework that encompasses the BRI and other smaller initiatives. Xi followed up with a Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022 at the Boao Forum for Asia, elaborated in a concept paper.[17]

These were followed in 2023 by the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) and Global AI Governance Initiative (GAIGI). The GCI claims to represent a "new form of human civilisation" that has surpassed modern Western civilisation and presents the world with a new aspirational model.[18] It reflects China's vision for the UN human rights pillar and posits that different civilisations can have different human rights standards,[19] whereas the GAIGI encapsulates China's ambitions to set standards in governing new technologies. Most recently, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), introduced in September 2025 ahead of the 80th anniversary of the United Nations, promises new solutions for enhancing global governance – with China leading the way into the new global order.[20]

All the above initiatives position China as a provider of global goods through aid, opportunities for development, geopolitical rebalancing, and forward-looking standard-setting.[21] Ultimately, China's leadership strives to present the country as a responsible international power, a champion of multilateralism, a leader of the developing world and a model that other countries emulate.[22] This is evident in its efforts to present China as a "democracy that works" in a White Paper in December 2021 and at various events.[23] It is equally apparent in China's rhetoric around its partnership with Russia, portraying both as "progressive forces" against Western hegemony and as defenders of peace and sovereignty.[24]

The CCP's discourse is framed around the notion of a global anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle. It positions China as a developing country in the Global South that is challenging the hegemony of the Global North – particularly the US-led West. This debate is not new at the UN, where member states have been divided along different ideological lines of North, South, East and West since its founding in 1945. When human rights concerns are raised, China accuses its critics of "politicisation" and of having an "imperialist" or "Cold War mentality".[25] Instead, it calls for democracy at the UN, respect for all countries' right to development, and mutually beneficial cooperation based on "common values" and "shared interests".

China's narratives on democracy, human rights and development have gained traction because they speak to real grievances about perceived Western hypocrisy and global inequalities in many parts of the world. The US retreat from multilateral cooperation under President

Trump has also given China a larger strategic space and platform for exerting influence.

Chinese leaders recognise that the existing international order is still based on liberal values such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy, values that partly conflict with the CCP's monopoly on power. By strengthening its discourse power, however, Beijing aims to reshape international norms in ways more aligned with government interests. As Xi put it in his meeting with Putin in March 2023, "Right now there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together."[26]

A notable difference can be discerned in the CCP's messaging for domestic audiences compared to what occurs on the international stage. For example, in his statements at the UN General Assembly in 2020 and at the World Economic Forum in 2021, Xi Jinping called for the world to "join hands to uphold the values of peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom shared by all of us and build a new type of international relations and a community with a shared future for mankind".[27] By contrast, in an article in the Party's leading theoretical journal *Qiushi* in 2019, Xi Jinping vowed that China "must never follow the path of Western 'constitutionalism', 'separation of powers', or 'judicial independence'". Instead, Xi said, China should follow its own path and "be adept at using law when participating in international affairs. In the struggle against foreign powers, we must take legal weapons, occupy the high ground of the rule of law.... We must actively participate in the formulation of international rules and act as participant, promoter, and leader during the changing process of global governance."[28]

Whether domestically or internationally, the CCP relies in equal parts on powers of persuasion and coercion to get its message across. China craves soft power but frequently resorts to compulsory means. In its efforts to enhance its power over meaning at the UN, China alternates promises of "mutually beneficial cooperation" with thinly veiled threats about "consequences" to compel other member states to accept and support its positions.[29]

Following the Party's Lead

The term "Global China" has become a shorthand in international policy and academic circles to describe the manifestation of China overseas. But experts rightfully note that the blanket reference to "China" is often oversimplified and the diversity of actors poorly understood. Global China has many faces and comprises state and non-state actors with different motives and interests that are sometimes aligned and sometimes conflict: central government representatives and local

officials; state-owned enterprises, private entrepreneurs and individual citizens who seek their fortunes abroad; scholars, researchers and engineers working with their foreign counterparts on a variety of issues. Any attempt to effectively engage with Chinese stakeholders must understand the complexity of those people and the diversity of entities.[30]

Whereas the space for international exchange and cooperation within China has shrunk significantly after the passing of the *Foreign NGO Law* in 2017, Chinese institutions and non-governmental organisations are encouraged to "go out" into the world.[31] Some of the most prominent Chinese organisations on the global stage are closely affiliated with the Chinese state and better characterised as GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations). They are officially tasked with strengthening China's "discourse power" and defending its "right to speak". But more independent social actors and NGOs also venture abroad to help address global issues, gain international experience and escape the tight restrictions at home. They too may frame their work in accordance with CCP language and priorities for strategic reasons.

Official discourse shapes beliefs and behaviour in multifaceted ways. It functions as a corset in which all diverse actors have to move and arrange themselves: some organisations, especially those affiliated closely with the government, may use the terminology to fulfil their foreign propaganda mission or out of reflexive political compliance. Others may seek benefits through strategic alignment, e.g. by adapting the BRI label to gain economic opportunities or investment. Framing activities abroad as a contribution to an official initiative or goal can also help ensure that such efforts are seen as unthreatening. Individuals may also follow the officially endorsed notions out of personal conviction. The promise of development and the need to struggle for progress has emerged as a powerful social narrative and shared aspiration of Chinese citizens.

While there are many different actors, motivations and degrees of alignment with official language, the outcome is still some level of "magnetic" alignment around the Party's central goals and narratives. A similar logic and mechanism can be seen at play as foreign governments, companies and at times scholars align themselves for strategic reasons, affinity in values, out of fear of consequences - or simply from lack of understanding what they are endorsing. This is helped by the fact that Beijing has a vast foreign propaganda and influencing apparatus at its disposal, in which a variety of actors at Party, state, central or local level try to ensure that the Party line is maintained in international relations. From joint statements, to Memoranda of Understanding and op-eds in international media – foreign citizens and

representatives may equally contribute to promoting China's political language and interests.

Foreign diplomats and officials often underestimate the importance of China's United Front and propaganda system, viewing its rhetoric as mere sloganeering and verbal posturing. But China's increasing discourse power was on full display in 2022 at the UN, where Beijing employed a range of familiar tools and tactics to control the narrative on Xinjiang and stall an independent UN investigation. This included mobilising Chinese diaspora organisations purporting to represent the Muslim Uyghur population to counter international criticism and organising a "friendly visit" by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, during which she adopted Beijing's terminology and referred to the camps in Xinjiang as "vocational education training centres". The High Commissioner was quoted in state media praising China for its achievements in economic development and human rights and photographed receiving a copy of Xi's Thought on Human Rights Protection.[32]

In the last couple of years, China has also launched a pressure campaign to get foreign dignitaries, publishers and mapmakers to adopt the name "Xizang" in place of "Tibet", to assert China's sovereignty and ownership of the region.[33] Such examples highlight the challenge, but also the need to maintain clear positions when engaging with China.

Language Matters: the Need for Decoding and Responding to China

China's rise as a global power and vision for global governance means increasing competition over the values, rules, standards and principles underpinning the international order. Policymakers worldwide must come to terms with the fact that China, like other great powers, uses its growing economic and political clout to shape this order. A rules-based world order relies on a global consensus on what the underpinning norms entail. When the understanding of terms like the rule of law, human rights, democracy, and sovereignty diverges to the extent where they become incompatible, international norms are undermined.

Language matters, as evidenced by the strategic emphasis the CCP puts on it. While it is crucial in diplomacy to leave room for strategic ambiguity where it enables constructive disagreement or the formation of a new consensus, it is increasingly important to discern where it becomes erosive to core values and harmful to one's goals. Instead, policymakers should understand and be ready to counter China's

rhetoric by making a compelling argument for why international norms in their universal sense matter and what benefits they hold for citizens.

The Decoding China Dictionary was developed by a group of China specialists with the aim of providing policymakers and practitioners with a simple and practical tool to help them decipher the official Chinese narrative, or "New China Newspeak".[34] To enable informed engagement with Chinese counterparts, governments, entrepreneurs, and civil society representatives worldwide need to understand the official meaning of frequently invoked concepts and key terms in international relations. It is our hope that this dictionary will serve as a point of reference for reflection, communication and strategy development.

While available in a readily accessible format (with colourful illustrations), the dictionary is based on decades of "swallowing sawdust by the bucketful," as the great Belgian Sinologist Simon Leys put it, describing the feeling when reading CCP documents. Our work builds on and was inspired and informed by sinologists and decoding experts such as Geremie Barmé, Michael Schoenhals, and Perry Link. We have included key works of reference and useful resources in a list at the end of the Dictionary. Finally, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the experts, scholars and practitioners who have provided insightful, generous and encouraging feedback on this project.

Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen

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Academic Freedom
【学术自由】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

The freedom to develop and disseminate knowledge and ideas is often regarded as indispensable for scientific and socio-economic progress. The UN treats academic freedom as a human right, one closely connected to freedom of expression.[1] This includes access to information, institutional autonomy and the ability to share insights within institutions of learning and the public realm. Academic freedom faces multiple restrictions and challenges worldwide, including ethical, political, financial and security-related constraints.

China officially lauds the ideal of academic freedom and its importance for progress, but requires adherence to Party-defined norms. Even as the country strives to be a global leader in science, it pursues an approach designed to keep ideological risks at bay and ensure that science serves national goals. In general, social sciences face stronger political restrictions while natural sciences benefit from significant freedom and financial support, with notable success in certain fields.

Analysis

The Party strives to secure China's position as a global leader in science, talent and innovation by 2035.[2] The PRC has more than 1,200 universities and invests heavily in the natural sciences and the build-up of elite research institutions and think tanks with global impact.[3] In 2020, Xi Jinping stated that China should foster international exchange and become a centre for "scientific openness and cooperation." But this openness is subject to political imperatives.

Early in its history, the Party staunchly advocated academic freedom, but it quickly moved to control China's intelligentsia. Political movements, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the '60s and '70s, persecuted hundreds of thousands

of scholars. Even after their rehabilitation in the late 1970s, institutions of higher learning remained under Party control—a principle that became further entrenched after the 1989 Tiananmen student protests.

That said, the 1990s and 2000s was a relatively open era when growing numbers of Chinese academics studied abroad. They brought new ideas and trends in scholarship back to China, from law to international relations, journalism and feminism. Political science and economic departments debated the role of the state, while even Party-run training schools welcomed foreign academics. The Party began tightening control in the late 2000s, culminating in *Document No. 9*, a communiqué circulated in 2013 that warned against threats emanating from "mistaken views and ideas in [...] public lectures, seminars, and university classrooms."[4]

Universities should be ideological "strongholds" of the CCP. In line with Xi's calls to uphold a "unity of academic freedom and norms"[5], the government increasingly promotes notions of responsibility (责任) and self-awareness (自觉) that place Party-state rationales at the centre of research and education. In 2019, Fudan University deleted a rare commitment to "freedom of thought" from its charter, joining other universities in including loyalty pledges to the CCP in their statutes. Universities have long been under a dual management system by a president, usually with strong academic credentials, and a parallel structure of Party secretaries and committees. In recent years, political steerage, monitoring of research and education, and vetting processes for international exchanges have substantially increased.

As China's leadership regularly emphasises, research must support national strategic goals, contribute to breakthroughs in key areas and help build an autonomous knowledge system. Universities receive substantial funding for natural sciences, technology, and engineering. Social sciences in turn should support the development of an "academic discourse system with Chinese characteristics" (学术话语体系) that highlights the advantages of China's political system and approaches.[6]

The retreat of human rights scholars after 2015, the disbandment of student groups advocating for workers' rights, and repeated censorship of economists since 2022 reflect expanding red lines. The Hong Kong student activism in the 2010s and the White Paper protests in 2022 likely boosted new measures to ensure "ideological security", including patriotic education curricula and expanding censorship.[7] The growing political pressure reverberates beyond China's borders and can impact research, publications and campus activities abroad.

Nonetheless, scholars and experts in China continue to explore and debate a wide range of issues. In areas where scientific progress is desired, China often offers more freedom than other countries. Availability of large datasets, public funding, and limited restrictions e.g. on stem cell research as well as support for new technologies such as AI have helped make China a leader in many fields and desirable counterpart in research collaboration.

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AID
【援助】

MARINA RUDYAK

BRIEF

In Europe, as in other major industrialised donor countries, aid is broadly understood as the transfer of resources from rich (donor) to poorer (developing) countries to promote social and economic development. A common view is that aid should be charitable, or at least contain a gift element, though in practice it has often been shaped by the political, strategic, and economic interests of donors.

In Chinese usage, by contrast, "aid" is largely conceived as mutual and reciprocal. Official discourse distinguishes between Western "development aid" (发展援助) and Chinese "foreign aid" (对外援助) to stress that China is not a "donor country". Instead, it defines its aid as South-South Cooperation, framed in terms of "equality", "friendship" and "mutual benefit". While aid may be reciprocated directly through goods or resources, politically, it is linked to relational power: recipients are expected to return the favour by supporting Chinese positions, for example in international organisations.

ANALYSIS

The first recipients of Chinese foreign aid were North Korea and North Vietnam in 1950. After the Bandung Conference of 1955, aid was extended to recently decolonised countries. From the outset, it was a strategic tool to help break China's international isolation: economic aid was reciprocated with diplomatic recognition, and vice versa. China's Premier Zhou Enlai explained in 1956 that despite China's poverty it was helping others because "we have understood that economic independence is fundamental to political independence" – meaning independence from the West.[1] On a 1964 tour of ten African countries, Zhou promulgated the "Eight Principles of Chinese Foreign Aid", the core of which – that aid should not be tied to any political conditions except for the non-recognition of Taiwan – still applies today.[2] Foreign aid also helped the PRC secure the China seat in the UN in 1971 with the support of developing countries, while Taiwan was excluded.

With reform and opening in 1978, high levels of aid spending came under scrutiny, as China – then among the world's 20 poorest countries – needed the scarce resources for its ambitious development. Yet Deng Xiaoping concluded that giving aid was a strategic necessity.[3] In 1980, the State Council noted, referring to China's UN accession: "China helped others, and they supported us [in return]. The international status China has achieved is inseparable from the support of friendly countries."[4] The assumption was that since aid was reciprocated in the past, it would be reciprocated in the future. Following this logic, Chinese aid rose sharply again after 1989, when international sanctions followed the Tiananmen Square crackdown and Taiwan sought to re-enter the UN in 1990. To this day, Chinese officials stress to African leaders how grateful China is to "African friends who supported China [...] in restoring its rightful seat in the United Nations."[5]

In Chinese discourse, "aid" is a broadly defined concept: almost anything within the logic of "you need it – we have it" can be called *aid*. It can mean *helping* countries fight poverty, or foreign investment and construction by Chinese companies supported by export subsidies. Since aid is often bundled with trade and investment, all Chinese development finance, whether commercial or concessional, may appear as aid to recipients. Official Development Assistance (ODA) databases in Cambodia and the Philippines, for instance, include both concessional loans and non-aid preferential export buyer's credits from China. This makes Chinese aid appear bigger than it actually is, also relative to DAC[6] donors.

The Chinese approach to aid is pragmatic rather than charitable. A controversy that illustrates the different understandings erupted early in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when China sent protective gear to Italy labelled "The friendship road knows no borders." While Italy's Five Star Movement presented it as a "gift", journalists accused China of masking commerce as generosity.[7] Yet, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China was willing to provide aid by exporting medical supplies despite domestic shortages - suggesting the misunderstanding lay with Europe.[8] For China, export was aid.

When giving aid, China certainly expects reciprocation. But by ascribing to developing countries the ability to reciprocate, it symbolically creates relations of equals – a dimension often overlooked in the West.

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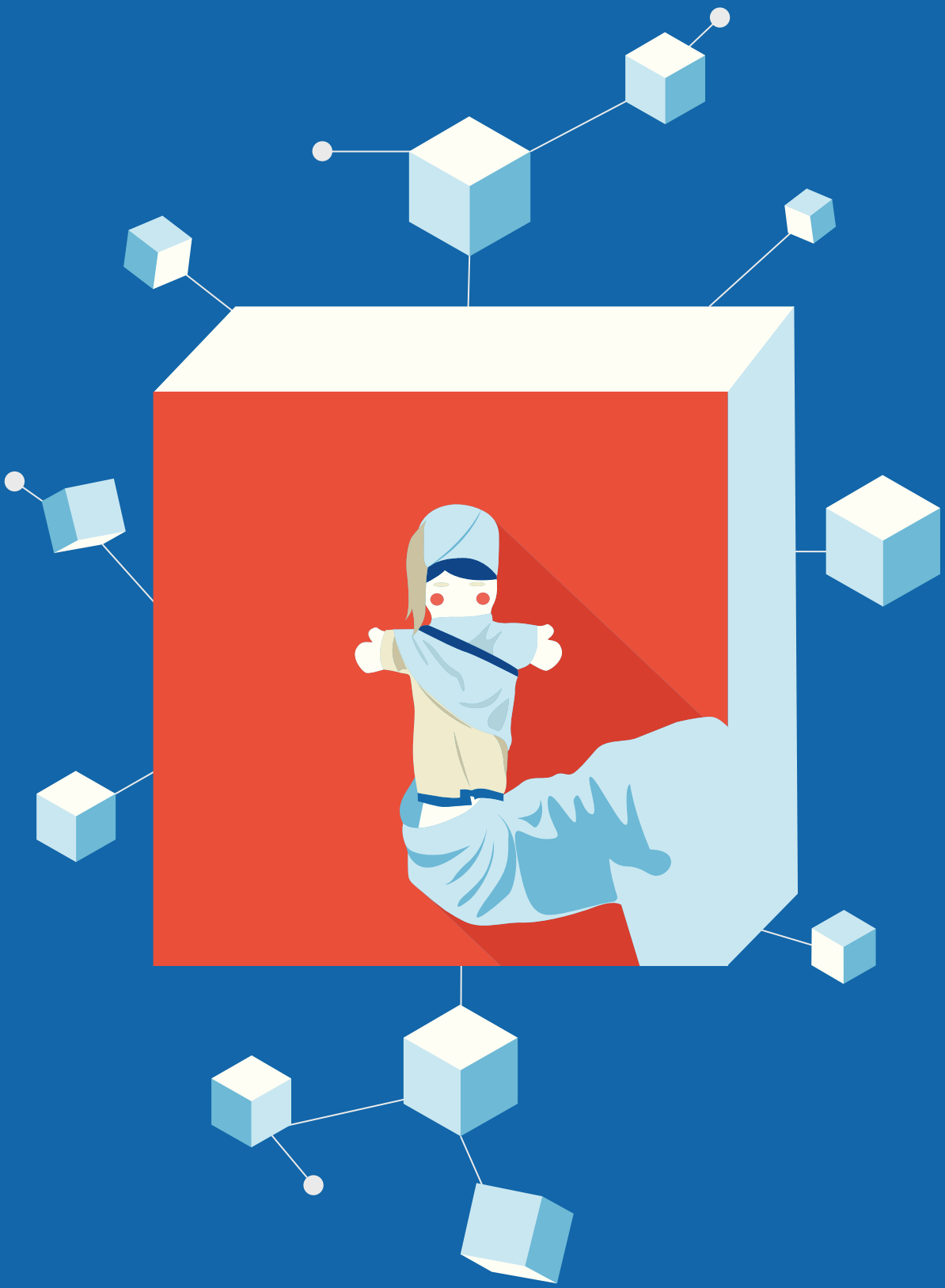

Autonomy
【自治】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

While the term "autonomy" lacks a generally accepted definition in international law, it is often understood as political or governmental autonomy, i.e., self-government or independence of action at the internal or domestic level.[1]

Through a compromise between the sovereign state and peoples who strive for self-determination, states may use autonomy arrangements to protect their territorial integrity while safeguarding the rights of minorities, and to avoid discord. However, governments differ in their compliance with such commitments. State actors striving to assert more control over autonomous areas in the name of national unity and territorial integrity may, for example, see a need to limit the degree of autonomy of self-ruling groups.

For its part, the Chinese government has continuously redefined the concept of autonomy and what it entails.[2] Tibet, Xinjiang, and three other Chinese regions hold the official status of being "autonomous" within the People's Republic of China. The PRC government has promised that Hong Kong would enjoy a "high degree of autonomy" from Beijing and made similar vows to the citizens of Taiwan should they ever embrace the Communist Party's (CCP) leadership. Nevertheless, China's redefinition of autonomy in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong has prompted scepticism over its ability to deliver on its promises of autonomy to the people of Taiwan.

Analysis

Some of the first states to establish institutions of formal autonomy were socialist regimes. According to CCP policy, China's ethnic minorities enjoy regional autonomy in communities where they live in higher concentration – "under the unified leadership of the state". Moreover, Chinese law stipulates that a governor of an autonomous region must belong to the ethnic minority which exercises autonomy.

Nevertheless, actual power rests not with the governors but with the regional Party Secretaries, who have almost exclusively belonged to the Han majority population. Chinese legal scholar Yu Xingzhong concludes that the political system specified in the *PRC Autonomy Law* "certainly does not correspond to what is usually understood [by] the term 'autonomy'".[3]

The CCP in 1951 signed an agreement with Tibetan representatives in which it promised the Tibetan people the right to exercise national regional autonomy under the PRC government.[4] The Tibetan government with the Dalai Lama as its head would govern the Tibet Autonomous Region, but it eventually became evident that it was merely a transitional and temporary arrangement which would not involve the preservation of Tibet's political, religious and social institutions. The Dalai Lama's subsequent call for "genuine autonomy" (within the PRC) has been dismissed by Beijing as an attempt to overthrow its grip on power.[5]

The "autonomous" institutions of the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* (XUAR), strongly resemble those in China's other autonomous regions. For instance, Xinjiang's People's Congress is subject to central veto power, and China's supreme court retains supervisory power over courts in the region. The Party-state's efforts to fight the so-called "three forces" (三股势力) – separatism, extremism and terrorism – in Xinjiang have further decreased the prospects for genuine autonomy. Rather than responding to calls for dialogue on the issue of autonomy, Beijing has adopted hard-line policies involving large-scale arbitrary detention of members of Muslim minority groups and other measures which "may constitute … crimes against humanity" according to a UN assessment.[6]

For Hong Kong, the Chinese government vowed to preserve its way of life for at least fifty years after the handover in 1997, according to the "one country, two systems" formula, and a "high degree" of autonomy. PRC laws would, by and large, not apply in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), and mainland officials were not to interfere in the regional government's affairs. Nevertheless, the Chinese foreign ministry in 2017 stated that the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* of 1984 – by which the PRC had vowed to maintain Hong Kong's autonomy – was "not at all binding for the central government's management over Hong Kong". [7] The Chinese regime has in recent years restricted basic rights in the HKSAR, with reference to four vaguely defined crimes: secession, subversion, terrorist activities, and collusion with foreign forces.

Beijing's position on Taiwan is that it will eventually unify the de facto independent territory with the PRC, but that it will enjoy an autono-

mous status similar to that of the HKSAR. The Chinese government's deviation from its original promises to Hong Kongers, Tibetans and Uyghurs on the issue of autonomy has however contributed to scepticism among Taiwan's citizens towards the proposed "high degree" of autonomy, should they one day be governed by the PRC.

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Civil Society 【公民社会】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

Article 35 of the Chinese *Constitution* grants Chinese citizens the right to freedom of assembly and association. The language is strikingly similar to Article 20 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) which guarantees freedom of assembly and association, laying the foundation for the development of a civil society composed of non-governmental organisations. The EU defines civil society as "all forms of social action carried out by individuals or groups who are neither connected to, nor managed by, the state".[1]

A similar commitment to independence is not to be found in China because it would contravene the overarching political maxim that the CCP leads in respect of everything, as codified in Article 1 of the Chinese *Constitution*. This principle is reflected in both regulation and types of actors present in Chinese society. The Chinese leadership has never embraced the term "civil society" in domestic political communication. Despite the proliferation of private-run NGOs and foundations since the 1980s, party- and government-organised organisations (GONGOs) still play a major role. The policy focus has been on regulating this growing sector and making sure all social organisations (社会组织) are supervised and tied to Party and state organs. They are meant to form a cooperative relationship with the government and serve the state's policy agenda, rather than being independent actors.

Analysis

Xi Jinping has stressed that social organisations should participate in all aspects of social affairs as part of a new innovative approach to governing society.[2] Yet one would be hard-pressed to find Xi or any other high-ranking official talking about "civil society" (公民社会 / 民间社会), as the concept has never gained a hold in official discourse. Although official organisations may use the term "civil society" in international

communications, the Party-state's view on this is clear: its vision is for a state-guided civil society.[3]

Before China's policy of reform and opening kicked off in the 1980s, the major party-led people's organisations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and party-led grassroots organisations, dominated the field. These still play a prominent role today, essentially having a monopoly on a range of issues and nationwide coordination. The establishment of independent labour unions or religious organisations is still off limits.[4]

However, the rise of modernisation of the early 1990s led to a host of social issues and a rising demand for services and self-organisation to fill the void from where the state had retreated. Civil society has been growing in China, though the composition of its actors has shifted. NGOs and private foundations now play an increasingly important role within the country and abroad.

The late 2000s and early 2010s saw the rapid professionalisation of advocacy work, a proliferation of human rights lawyers, and cooperation with international actors. Internet and social media provided a platform for cross-regional and thematic networking. This triggered concerns that civil society might emerge as a threat to regime stability. As *Document No. 9* stated: "For the past few years, the idea of civil society has been adopted by Western anti-China forces…."[5]

The mid- to late 2010s were then marked by repeated crackdowns, especially on rights-advocacy organisations. Legal and institutional reforms focused on reining in self-organisation and bringing a sector that had largely developed outside the CCP's control back under its guidance. The primary goal today is to mobilise and guide social resources and actors to achieve the CCP's agenda, with the government procuring services from societal actors (政府购买社会服务).

It is a tight embrace: non-state-affiliated NGOs require supervision by a state organisation. Compliance is monitored through rating systems. Since 2015, there has been an ongoing campaign to establish party cells in and ensure party members are recruited to social organisations to tie them to the Party State and communicate its expectations to them.[6] This has been accompanied by strict regulation of international actors.

The *Foreign NGO Law*, in effect since January 2017, placed foreign NGOs under a dual-supervision system by a state supervisory unit and the public security administration.[7] *The National Security Law for Hong Kong* has further dampened international exchanges and cooperation since coming into effect on 1 July 2020 by introducing the

highly ambiguous offence of "collusion" with foreign actors. At the UN, China is working to limit the role of NGOs in line with its view of the state as the sole representative of social interests.[8]

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Civilisation 【文明】

David Bandurski

Brief

Emerging in Europe in the late 17th century as a prejudicial marker of social advancement, the modern concept of "civilisation" had evolved by the mid-20th century to include multiple centres of culture around the world. This is reflected in the UN Charter, which urged that "the main forms of civilisation" should be represented in the International Court of Justice. Introduced to China through Japanese translations in the late 19th century, civilisation initially represented modernisation and a rejection of traditional Chinese and minority cultures.

Since the early 2000s, China's communist leadership made a dramatic about-face and has embraced ancient culture as a source of legitimacy. Under Xi Jinping the party depicts itself as inheritor of an ancient culture culminating in a novel form of modernisation, superior to the West's, that incorporates Sinicised Marxism. Positioned as a uniquely ancient civilisation and an alternative to "Western capitalist civilisation", China sees itself leading globally — a twist conflating the country's multipolar ambitions with the UN's discourse of inclusion.

Analysis

The concept of civilisation arose in ancient Greece and China around the same time — about 2,500 years ago as a way of differentiating between "civilised" cultures (one's own) and "barbarians" (the other).[1] In its modern form, it arose in Europe in the late 17th to 18th centuries during the Enlightenment to denote a society with laws, commerce, reason, and manners. It soon reverted to its ancient meaning in the European colonial era to justify European conquest over allegedly inferior peoples.

The modern concept arrived in this context in China in the 19th century as European countries began carving up China, justifying their actions by China's supposed backward civilisation. As they grappled with this new situation, Chinese thinkers repurposed an ancient term, *wenming* (文明), to mean "civilisation" in the 19th century European

sense. Prominent Chinese thinkers used it to adopt Social Darwinist ideas that ranked civilisations. Believing that their own traditional culture, or civilisation, was backward, they advocated a new Chinese nationalism based on "prosperity and power" (富强).[2] From the late 19th century onward, successive governments, including that of the Guomindang from 1912 to 1949, attacked traditional culture and religion, including traditional writing styles.[3]

As Mao Zedong and his Chinese Communist Party came to power, "civilisation" largely vanished from official discourse as the party focused on opposing imperialism and bourgeois influences through Soviet-inspired Marxism, culminating in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when Mao purged those who would "corrupt the masses… with the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes." Confucian temples and texts became primary targets for destruction. The decade inspired an orgy of cultural destruction, doing irreparable damage to the traditional Chinese culture that in the 21st century would return to the centre of the party's legitimacy.

As China emerged from the Maoist era in 1978, "spiritual civilisation" (精神文明) emphasised that alongside material modernisation the country needed moral development to cultivate idealistic, ethical, cultured and disciplined socialist citizens. For the next three decades, "civilised" behaviour — from public hygiene to proper internet use — became a focus of campaigns coordinated by the Central Civilisation Office.[4] Under Hu Jintao (2002-2012), this drive extended to "civilised" cities and "civilised" online conduct, merging social etiquette with political compliance.

Under Xi Jinping, the concept of civilisation has been aggrandised as a synthesis of cultural glory. According to popular understanding, Chinese civilisation extends 5,000 years, a claim based on writings about a semi-mythical Xia dynasty for which the government seeks evidence — for reasons that have to do with the present-day politics of civilisation.[5]

All of this has a clear political goal, with ancient glories building historically toward the unassailable legitimacy of the Party. China's ancient civilisation is posited as extending through to the present day, culminating in what the CCP has since November 2021 called a "new form of human civilisation" — a melding of ancient Chinese cultural elements with a new Marxist modernity. This narrative reached its fullest expression in Xi's 2023 Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which promotes cultural relativism in human rights standards while positioning China's civilisational model as having overtaken Western modernity to offer a superior path for global development.

Endnotes

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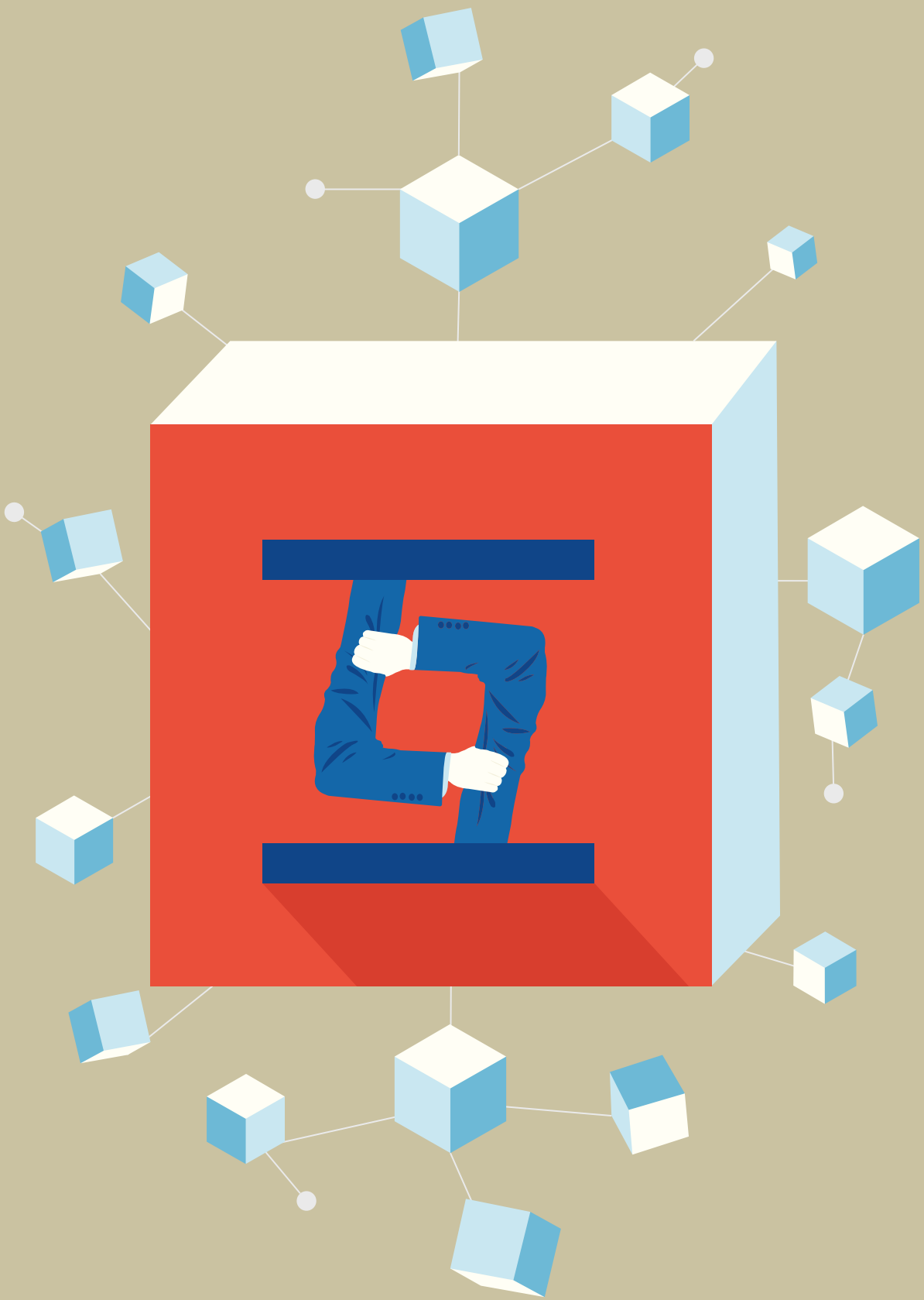

Cooperation 【合作】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

"Building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation" is the core of Xi Jinping's thoughts on diplomacy.[1] "Win-win cooperation" (合作共赢) is presented as an alternative to the prevailing "old" (i.e., Western-dominated) type of international relations, which top Chinese diplomats see as dominated by confrontational zero-sum game thinking and a Cold War mentality.[2] China argues that, instead, cooperation should respect the "diversity of cultures of development paths", while international affairs should be handled through "policy coordination" on the basis of shared or common interests. Cooperation should be "mutually beneficial" and contribute to "common development".

In UN discourse, cooperation is understood as a means of pursuing an *existing* common goal, while contemporary Chinese political thought views cooperation as a way to *uncover* shared interests and build "friendly relations" based on the principle of "seeking common ground while maintaining differences". Internally, building shared interests is seen as key to "removing the obstacles to China's peaceful development in the world".[3]

Analysis

The narrative that cooperation between states should be friendly, mutually beneficial and promote common development has been central to China's foreign-policy discourse ever since the founding of the PRC. This rhetoric of solidarity is not uniquely Chinese but is the rhetoric of the Global South. In China, however, it carries a particular connotation of relationality and reciprocity. The Chinese international relations scholar Qin Yaqing argues that, in Chinese political thought, cooperation is understood as a means to find "common interests" in order to create *relational power*, which rests on the power of human relations.[4] This is why summit diplomacy – such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation summits or the various BRI fora – plays a central role in how China conducts foreign policy.

The underlying assumption here is that shared interests always exist: they just need to be found. Therefore, "pragmatic cooperation" is always possible. Behind the language of mutual benefit, particularly in the context of "friendly cooperation" with countries of the Global South through foreign aid or loans, stands the belief that recipients will reciprocate with political support, e.g., by not giving Taiwan political recognition or by voting with China at the United Nations. Calls to "strengthen international cooperation" often come with a call to strengthen "multilateralism" (多边主义).

Beyond that, the Chinese term for "cooperation", *hezuo* (合作), can refer to nearly any kind of transaction or interaction between two or more parties, which probably makes it the most mistranslated and misunderstood term in Sino-Western relations. For Chinese state-owned enterprises, participating in "international cooperation" means foreign trade and investment. "International cooperation departments" within ministries are mostly concerned with protocol and ceremony, maintaining liaison, and organising conferences. "International cooperation centres" in Chinese provinces are mostly export-trade promotion organisations. In the context of Covid-19, "pragmatic cooperation in the field of health" with France referred to selling masks and ventilators.

"Solidary cooperation", on the other hand, was frequently used by Xi Jinping to highlight China's support to the Global South and counter criticism of China's early cover-up of the pandemic. "Cultural cooperation" has the goal of promoting "mutual" appreciation, understanding and respect, which in the official context is part of the effort to "tell the China Story well" (讲好中国故事). However, "cultural cooperation" can also mean providing digital TVs to African villages or establishing joint TV stations. China's "international development cooperation" includes both foreign aid and development lending in the context of the BRI. Its purpose is to promote the construction of the "community of a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体), that is, the Chinese vision of multilateralism.

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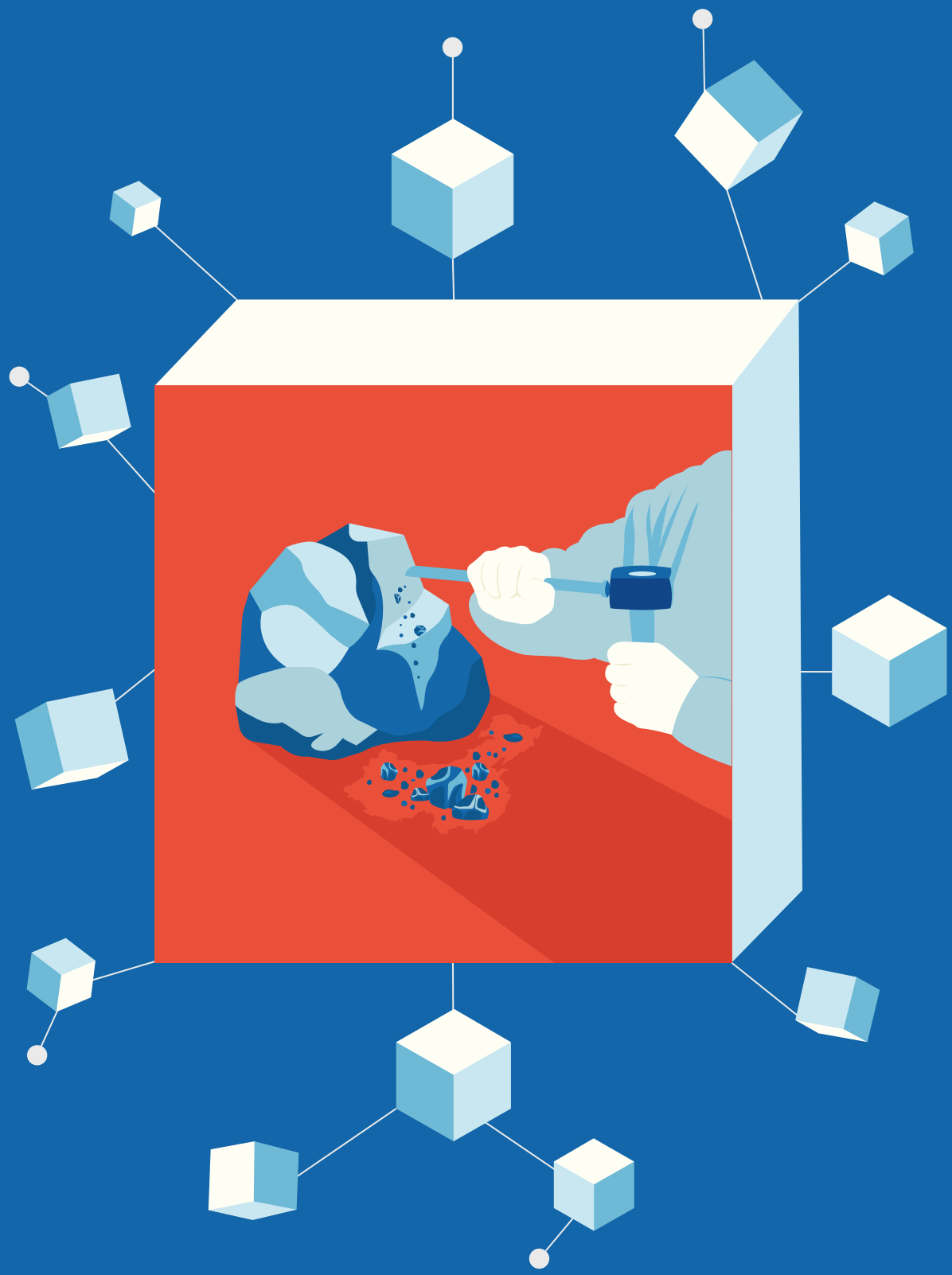

Culture
【文化】

David Bandurski

Brief

UNESCO defines culture broadly as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."[1] For the Chinese Communist Party, however, culture is first and foremost deeply political, one of a number of "fronts" in the Party's struggle against its enemies and critics, both internal and external.[2] In his remarks to the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, Mao Zedong made it clear that "art and literature [must] follow politics".[3]

While China's cultural industry has grown in leaps and bounds in the post-Mao period of reform and China's opening, the Party's claim to be the political heart of culture has remained. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping since late 2012, culture has been renewed as a political priority around such notions as "building [China as] a cultural power" (建成文化强国), ensuring "cultural security" (文化安全) and mobilising against the "cultural hegemony" of the United States and the West.[4] Culture is a means both to advance the power and legitimacy of the Party and to strengthen the CCP against threats to its legitimacy globally.

Analysis

For much of the modern era, China's relationship with culture has been fraught with contradictions. During the New Culture Movement of the 1920s, a new brand of scholars, writers and activists sought to throw off the influence of traditional Confucian ideas, which they blamed for China's weakness, and create a new society based on the "Western" ideals of science and democracy. But even as China looked to the West, notions of culture were closely tied up with the experience of imperialism since the mid-eighteenth century. An influential article written in 1923, in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, sounded a warning about "cultural invasion", characterised as the last of four means by which Western imperialism was visited upon China.[5] In his remarks to the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, Mao

Zedong famously spoke of the power "of the pen and of the gun", and the importance of the cultural as well as the military front.[6] During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), zealous bands of so-called Red Guards went on a national rampage of cultural destruction in a campaign to crush the "Four Olds" – old ideas, old culture, old habits and old customs. This inaugurated successive waves of destruction that spanned a decade, resulting in untold cultural and human costs.

The end of the Cultural Revolution came with a growing recognition that the political excesses of the prior decade had stemmed in large part from Mao Zedong's overwhelming dominance of cultural and political messaging. The relative openness of the 1980s brought about an environment of "culture fever", with more creativity and truth-seeking in media and the arts.[7] This came to a dramatic halt with the violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in China in June 1989. The focus for the CCP turned to a combination of maintaining the Party's political control over culture and the media while pushing commercial development and "a culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics".[8] The idea that culture is "an important component of comprehensive national power" (综合国力的重要标志) was introduced in 1997.[9] A decade later, China began prioritising public diplomacy and the development of "soft power", though only with limited results, and initiated a global media drive in which the government spent an estimated 45 billion yuan to expand state media overseas.[10]

Since 2012, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, Chinese culture as a resource of comprehensive national power has been a major priority for the leadership. Xi Jinping has spoken about the need to "strengthen cultural confidence and build a socialist cultural power" (坚定文化自信，建设社会主义文化强国).[11] China's leaders and state-run media argue that China's global cultural strength, which includes its capacity to offset criticism and "tell China's story well", is key to "breaking through Western cultural hegemony" (打破西方文化霸权) and to changing the "unequal relationship" with the West.[12] This interpretation of culture and its political value is closely tied to the nationalistic Xi-era notion of the "Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the CCP's promise to return China to the centre of global affairs.[13] In his political report to the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, Xi Jinping said: "Without a high level of cultural confidence, without a glorious and flourishing culture, there can be no great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".[14]

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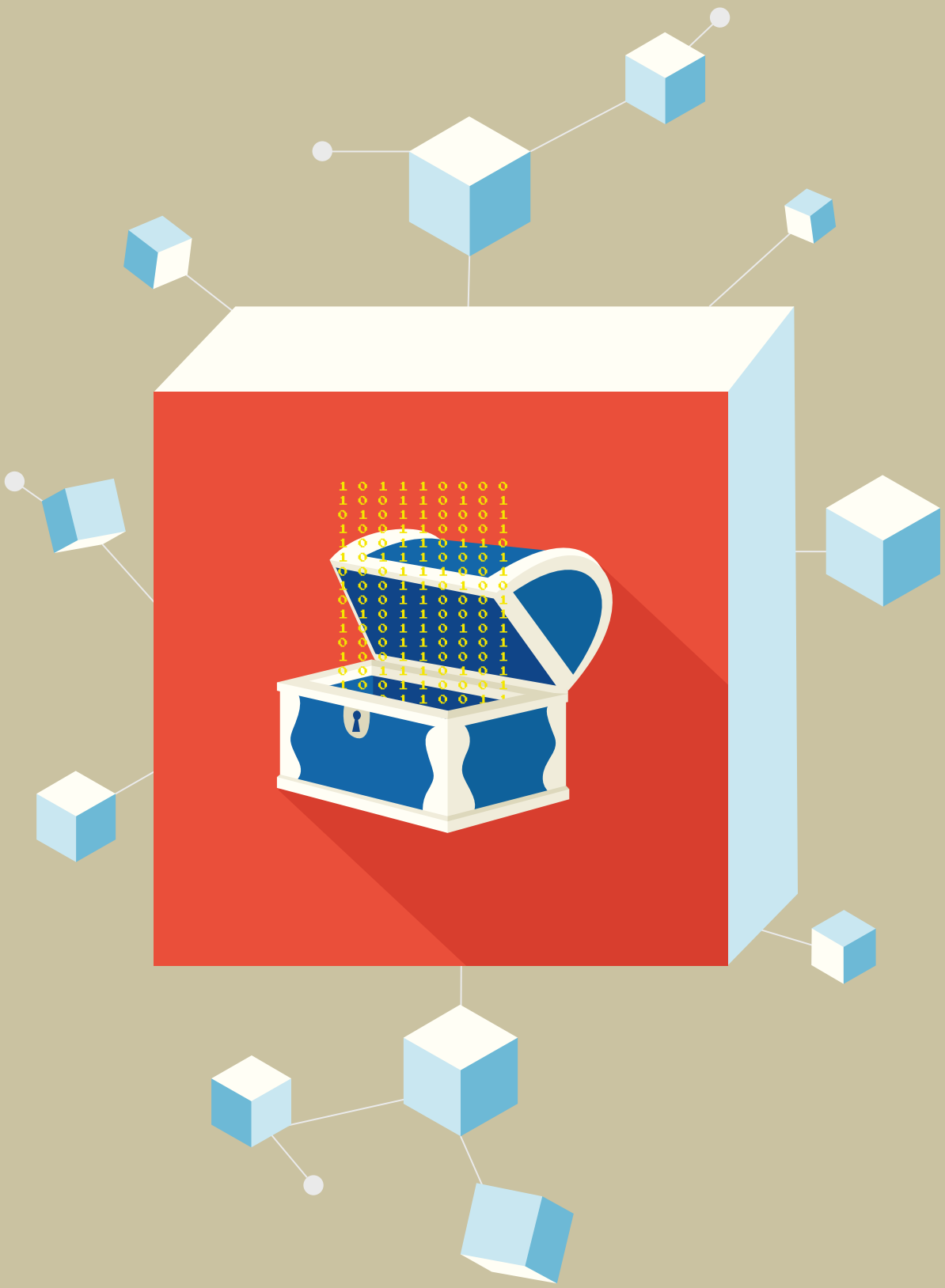

Data Security
【数据安全】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

The rapid development of digital technologies has brought new challenges in protecting data from misuse, loss, or unauthorised access. In liberal democracies, data security is closely linked to the right to privacy, which is governed by laws that emphasise transparency and consent. While China has benefited greatly from the digital revolution in terms of economic growth and technological progress, the Party-state also sees significant threats. As the data-driven economy has prompted a reallocation of power from governments to data-powered firms, China's approach to data security has become closely tied to its objectives of maintaining state control.

Chinese data-related laws emphasise data localisation and strict government oversight to strengthen national security while reducing reliance on foreign technology. The Cybersecurity Law of 2017, for example, requires government approval for transferring certain data overseas. Despite a series of new laws, foreign officials and legal experts remain concerned over a lack of clarity regarding rules for the cross-border transfer of data (CBTD).[1]

Analysis

In 2017, *The Economist* declared that data had become the world's most valuable resource, surpassing oil.[2] In the wake of the dotcom bubble Internet companies had harnessed vast quantities of data for advertising purposes, which was being leveraged to fuel the development of AI services, creating huge wealth and power, the magazine noted.

This shift was not lost on China's Communist Party, which viewed data not just as a commodity, but since 2019 also designated "data" as a critical factor of production alongside land, labour, capital, and

technology.[3] The state had already begun investing heavily in "informatisation" (信息化) in the 1990s, part of a programme to build digital infrastructure, strengthen the domestic tech industry, and ensure national security. Data had become a strategic asset to advance national interests.

The Party-state's efforts to control data have been codified and made more pronounced in recent years through a series of foundational laws. The Cybersecurity Law (2017) laid the groundwork by mandating network security and requiring data localisation for critical information infrastructure operators. This was followed by the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law, both enacted in 2021. This legislation enhances state control by ensuring government access to information, mandating security reviews for cross-border transfers of "important data," and placing strict new obligations on private firms. A further tightening occurred in April 2023 when a revised anti-espionage law banned the transfer of any data related to "national security and interests",[4] broad and vague terms that severely restrict international firms' ability to conduct due diligence.

This domestic strategy is also reflected in the nation's efforts to shape the international conversation around data. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2020 announced the "Global Data Security Initiative" (全球数据安全倡议), a less known precursor to Xi Jinping's other Global Initiatives. The GDSI implicitly addressed foreign concerns about over-reliance on Chinese communications technology, stressing the need for an "objective and rational attitude," while defending domestic requirements for data localisation.

Domestically, the casting of data as a security issue has become increasingly pronounced in China's legal framework. Data security was formally added to a list of twenty key categories in Xi's "Comprehensive National Security" concept in 2025, underscoring that data is now officially viewed as being on par with political, military, and economic security.[5] This shift reflects Beijing's concern that foreign access to data could undermine its governance and economic stability. This national security-centric approach has become a significant point of friction with Europe, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen calling the Chinese provisions "excessive" and expressing concern about the lack of clarity in China's data security regulations.

As more of China's partners in the Global South turn to communications technology and connected devices from Chinese firms, some of the data security concerns raised in the Western hemisphere are also heard in these countries. In 2018, for example, French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that China had installed listening devices in the African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa.[6]

Thus far, however, Chinese tech is mainly hailed in Global South countries for being relatively affordable and user-friendly. For example, the proliferation in Africa and Latin America of Chinese 4G network gear and "Safe City" digital surveillance programmes is rarely openly contested in these regions.

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Democracy
【民主】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

In the PRC, democracy refers to the Marxist-Leninist system of democratic dictatorship and democratic centralism, in which the CCP is the ultimate representative of the people. This "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics" is explicitly distinguished from liberal democracy, which is seen as incompatible with China's unique conditions. While citizens in China can vote for their local representatives, the CCP is constitutionally defined as the sole ruling party and has guiding power over all legislative and state organs.

Despite the lack of a multi-party system, in which access to power is based on periodic elections by universal suffrage, the Party defines itself as inherently democratic. Through "consultative democracy" (协商民主), the CCP formally incorporates the interests of various social groups. Legitimacy is mainly derived from ensuring order, prosperity, and security. Emboldened by successes in delivering economic growth, public health and welfare, the Party increasingly presents this as the superior model internationally. As Xi Jinping stated in 2017: "China's socialist democracy is the most comprehensive, genuine and effective democracy."[1]

Analysis

Rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology, the term "democracy" (民主) has been deeply embedded in Party language since the founding of the CCP, reflected in the original mission to build a "people's democracy". In 2019, Xi coined the term "whole-process democracy", in which the CCP gathers voices from within and outside of the Party, "enabling people to exercise their right to be masters of the state".[2]

The conceptualisation of China as a democratic state rests on three pillars:

The CCP is democratic, hence China must be too: Under "democratic centralism", major policy decisions are taken by central Party organs,

but are discussed at all administrative levels in formalised "democratic life meetings".[3] Work regulations issued in 2020 define the "centre" even more clearly and prescribe *Xi Jinping Thought* as the baseline, thus restricting divergence from top-down ideological guidance.[4]

Chinese citizens can vote: Articles 2 and 3 of China's *Constitution* state that citizens exercise their power through the People's Congresses (China's legislative organs), which are created through democratic elections. Based on the *Election Law*, all citizens over 18 can directly vote for delegates up to the county and urban district levels and are eligible to stand in elections. However, candidates for People's Congresses are generally preselected and the *Constitution* makes clear that the PRC is a socialist state under the sole leadership of the CCP.[5]

The CCP considers other stakeholders and interests: Formally, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences serve as the main channel for consultative democracy. Under the label of multiparty cooperation with eight democratic bloc parties and gathering of public feedback (including online), the CCP does solicit opinions from various stakeholders, as long as they do not contest the CCP's policy priorities.

The ideal of consensus-oriented, efficient democracy under centralised Party leadership is juxtaposed to the confrontational, erratic nature of Western democracy. Now presented as the only suitable system for China, it has not always gone uncontested. The 1989 student protests called for a reform of China's political system, including elements of liberal democracy. In the aftermath of this movement, the term largely disappeared from political debates in China.

In 2002, the 16th Party Congress included the statement that "inner-party democracy is the life of the Party". Leading Party thinkers brought the concept back into play.[6] Though limited to a vision of democracy that is compatible with one party rule, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, officials, media and citizens publicly discussed strengthening inner-party democracy and liberalising local government elections to allow a pluralism of positions and include more non-party members.[7] Independent candidates stood for election and had some success. In the 2011 local elections, pro-civil rights candidates attempted to enter the race under the motto "One person, one vote, together we change China".[8]

After Xi rose to power in 2012, "democracy" was included as one of the 12 core socialist values.[9] However, this did not mark a more liberal conceptualisation of democracy. Experiments in participation were shut down, and independent candidates were arrested. In 2013, *Document No. 9* defined liberal democracy as a threat to regime stability. Concepts such as constitutional democracy, separation of powers

and judicial independence are regularly dismissed as "incorrect ideological thinking" that must be met with resolute resistance.[10] Liberal values were characterised as the root cause of sustained protests in Hong Kong in 2019, ushering in extensive legal and electoral reforms to ensure that only "patriots" supportive of government policy may run for office.[11]

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Development
【发展】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

In the context of DAC[1] donor countries, "development" is commonly understood as a multidimensional socio-economic process with political, economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions. In this regard, the political dimension (in particular, democracy) is seen as essential to realising the others, which is why development cooperation emphasises good governance, respect for human rights and corruption prevention, often making respective efforts by recipients a condition for aid.

Chinese discourse views "development" primarily as a process of technology-centred "modernisation". "Economic development" by means of investment in transport, energy and digital infrastructure construction, trade-related infrastructure, production capacities and innovative technology is thought to go hand-in-hand with "social development". "Economic and social development" are seen as the necessary precondition for both improving the "people's livelihood" – a term that refers to education, medical and health services, and public welfare facilities – and for "green development", to be achieved through technological innovation. China criticises Western donor countries for making improvements in good governance, anti-corruption efforts and human rights a condition for development assistance, arguing that these aspects should not be put above development issues on the economic and technical level, such as infrastructure building or industrial and agricultural development.

Analysis

China rejects the conditionality approach and argues that donors should respect the developing countries' "right to independently choose their development path" and focus on "strengthening the capacity for independent development".[2] As a process, development should be "self-reliant" (自力更生, literally translated as: "regeneration through one's own efforts") and "independent".

The concept of development as technology-led modernisation can be traced back to Sun Yat-sen, since then, it has been perceived as a means to overcome the "underdevelopment" and "backwardness" that caused China to lose the Opium Wars.[3] Following the Bandung Conference of 1955, China's premier and foreign minister Zhou Enlai argued that China considered economic independence to be a prerequisite for political independence.[4] Therefore, while focusing on its own development, China would also provide assistance to other developing countries – implying that helping the latter in their economic development would foster their political independence from the US-led capitalist bloc.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, who succeeded Mao Zedong as the paramount leader of the CCP, declared that China's development required "Four Modernisations" – in agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology. Shortly afterwards, the human rights activist Wei Jingsheng wrote an essay displayed on the Democracy Wall in Beijing, calling on the CCP to add "democracy" as a "Fifth Modernisation", for which he was arrested and later exiled to the US.[5]

Under Xi Jinping, development has become linked to the "two centenary goals": the centenary of the founding of the CCP in 2021, at which point China became a "moderately well-off society"; and the centenary of the founding of the PRC in 2049, at which point China should have achieved the "Chinese Dream" of national "rejuvenation" and reclaimed the central position it lost through the Opium Wars.

Since the times of Zhou Enlai, China's policy of international development cooperation can be seen as an externalisation of its domestic development agenda. The language used to describe the objectives of China's foreign aid – to "enrich and improve their peoples' livelihood, and promote their economic growth and social progress" – is nearly identical with the language employed when talking about the development needed to overcome the "relative backwardness" of China's Western and national minority regions.[6] The "Chinese Dream" has been extended to a "World Dream" of "common development" (共同发展).

Yet, for a long time, China has maintained that its "foreign aid" (对外援助) to developing countries was not "development aid" (发展援助). The latter term was almost exclusively used to describe Western donors' aid, including to China. This practice has changed under Xi Jinping: the "Right to Development" (发展权) White Paper states that China has been providing "development aid" for sixty years.[7] The name of the aid agency CIDCA recently established in 2018 stands for "China International Development Cooperation Agency", implying that China now sees itself as a development provider.

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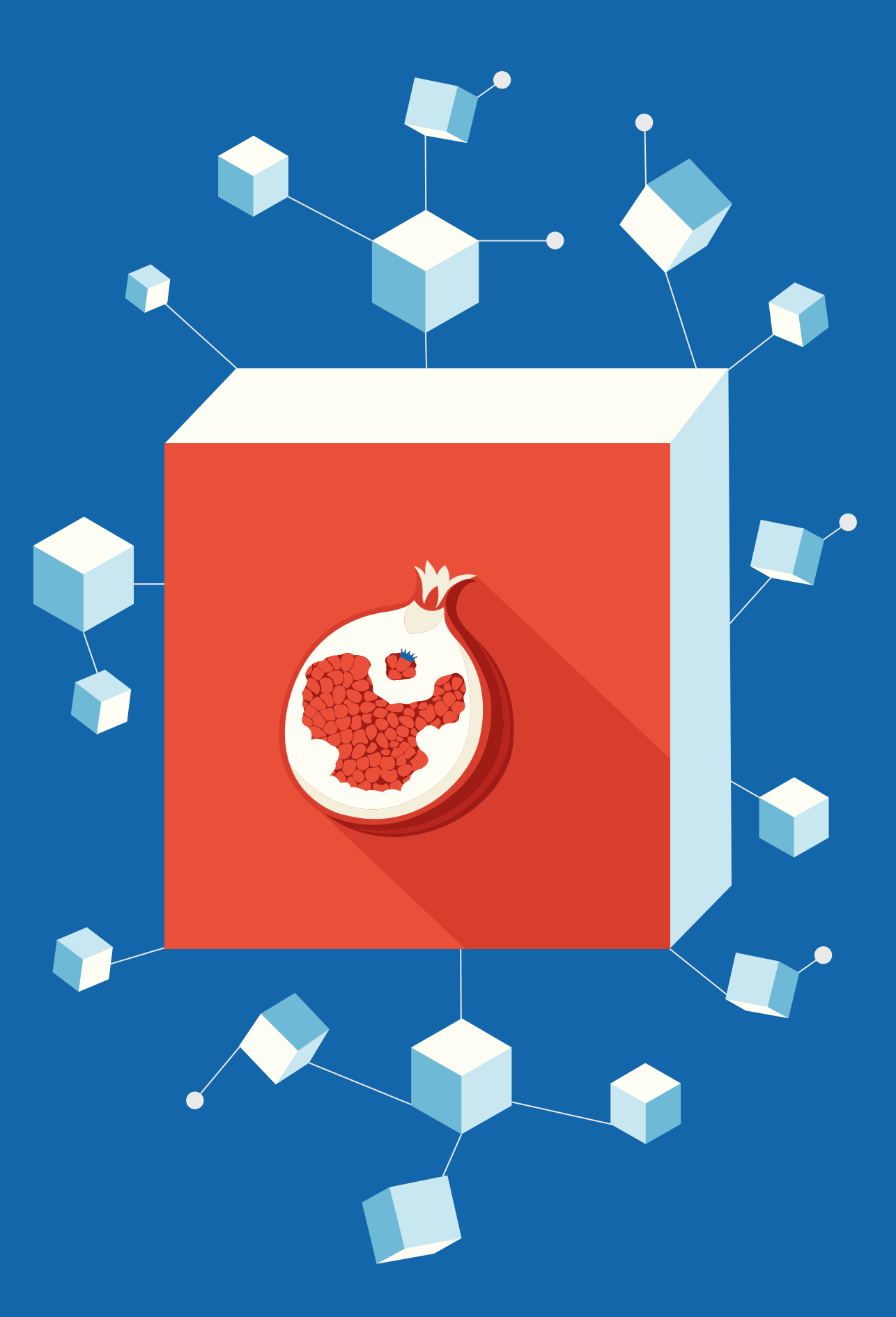

Ethnic Minority
【少数民族】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

In the UN context, the term ethnicity often factors in a group's common origin, language, customs, and beliefs, but can only be subjectively and arbitrarily defined. [1] The notion of ethnic minorities is a social construct which appeared with the creation of the nation-state, which was built around a constructed nationality, or an ethnic majority.

The Chinese Communist Party has divided China's population into ethnic groups or nationalities consisting of 55 minorities and the *Han* (汉族) – the majority group which is itself a construct of the late 19th century.[2] In China's 2021 census, 125 million citizens – nearly 9 percent of the population – were classified as members of the official minority groups, such as Mongol, Tibetan and Uyghur.[3]

China's ethnic diversity and its large territory is partly the result of previous conquests. As this historical expansionism does not match the official narrative of an inherently peaceful Chinese civilisation, the CCP claims to govern a "united multi-ethnic country since ancient times".[4]

Analysis

After the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, its first president Sun Yat-sen proposed that China consisted of a union of five *minzu* (民族, nationalities or ethnic groups): the Han, the Manchu, the Mongols, the (Hui) Muslims, and the Tibetans. This setup was soon replaced by the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) – the Chinese nation, people, or race – a super-ethnicity with a supposed common ancestry which remains a crucial part of the CCP's rhetoric on ethnic affairs.

During its early years, the Chinese Communist Party contemplated allowing non-Han minorities independence from China.[5] After the

founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Chinese state however embarked on an "ethnic classification project", which researchers have described as one of the great colonising missions of the twentieth century.[6] The project divided the population into ethnic groups, following Joseph Stalin's criteria: common language, territory, economy, and psychological nature. Most nationalities were classified in the 1950s, and by 1979 their number reached the current 56.

Several of the ethnic minorities officially acknowledged by the Chinese state also encompass large groups that live outside the PRC's borders, such as ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. Some ethnic groups with a large international representation have not been included among China's 55 official minorities. These include the Hakka (which are labelled as Han) and Hmong (which have been included in the Miao minority).

Today, official discourse portrays the ethnic minorities as unique but unified with the Han as part of the 'Chinese nation'. This concept and the associated claim of authority over these groups transcends national boundaries, as the Party also includes foreign nationals with predominantly Han, but increasingly also other heritage that is encompassed under the notion of "Chinese".[7] The Chinese government also counts the *Gaoshan* (高山族) in Taiwan as one of the PRC's ethnic minorities, by which it refers to 16 aboriginal groups officially recognised by the Taiwanese government.[8] China, for its part, claims to have no indigenous peoples, as it would otherwise have to acknowledge its history of colonisation.[9]

China's minorities have traditionally been regarded as primitive and even inferior, not least by Han elites.[10] In official channels, minorities tend to be stereotypically portrayed as separate from the majority; dancing, singing, and wearing traditional costumes – including delegates to the National People's Congress, China's legislature.[11]

The PRC *Constitution* states that China's nationalities are equal, and contemporary official discourse portrays their relationship as being as close as "seeds in a pomegranate".[12] According to the *Constitution*, all ethnic groups "have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own traditions and customs".

In practice, however, the ethnic minorities are increasingly exposed to a "second-generation ethnic policy" (第二代民族政策), a policy framework that emphasises a unified national identity and severely restricts the rights of minorities to their own cultures, languages, and identities.[13] The minority groups lack meaningful political participation, few of them are represented at all in the Central Committee, and it is rare

for members of the ethnic minorities to reach the higher echelons of political power.

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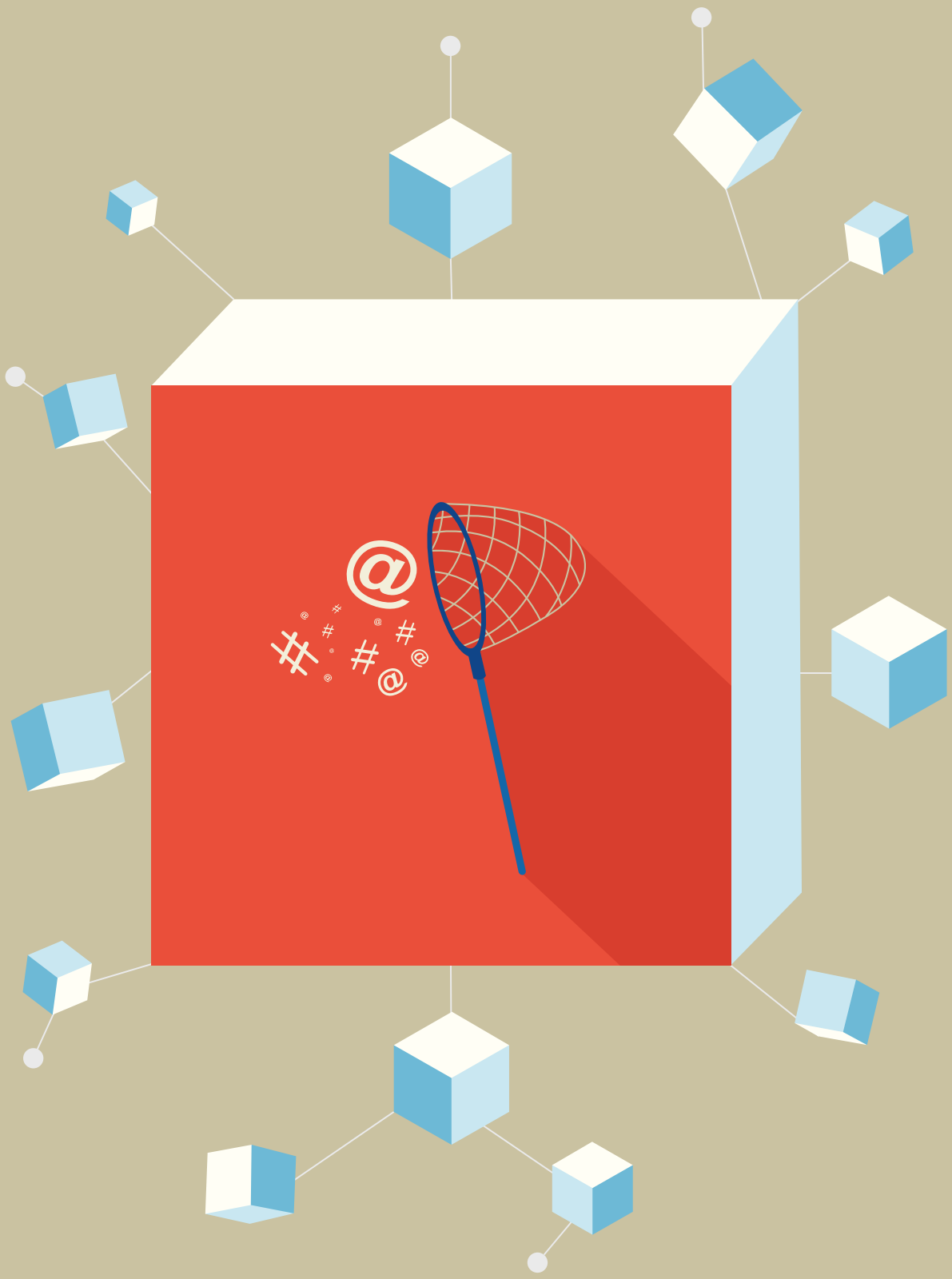

Free and Open Internet
【自由开放的网络】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

Over the past decades, the internet has become a global foundation for communication and trade. UN norms call for an open, free, and secure cyberspace where human rights are fully protected and advocate a multi-stakeholder governance system that includes civil society. However, states increasingly restrict information flows for various reasons, including privacy, data security, combating disinformation, national security, or to maintain political control.

In international forums, China supports an open internet, emphasising its economic potential. Domestically, the government-driven rapid digitisation has brought significant benefits for communication, commerce, and public administration. But China has also created one of the most comprehensive censorship systems and heavily restricts information flows across its borders, to contain what the Party sees as ideological risks.[1]

Through exports, loans, and cooperation agreements, China's government and its telecommunication firms are a major force in enabling connectivity, particularly in the Global South. While this helps countries expand access and reap the benefits of digitisation, China also shares its technologies and approaches for internet control. Cybersecurity and cyber sovereignty are key concepts in the PRC's internet governance approach, indicating that a "free" internet is what remains after states have exercised their interests.

Analysis

In the 1990s, concepts of net neutrality reflected a utopian vision of the internet as a global public space free from government control. Though this proved unattainable, international norms still enshrine commitments to a free and open internet, including the 2024 UN

Global Digital Compact.[2] As home to over 1.1 billion internet users and many of the world's largest digital infrastructure providers and tech firms, China is a major actor in defining global concepts and standards for internet governance.

China's leadership recognised the internet's potential early on, with government policies since the 1990s aiming to harness the potential of digitisation and (more recently) establish China as a "cyber power" (网络强国).[3] With notable success: The digital economy is now a key driver of growth, even in rural areas. China's communication platforms connect citizens and provide access to information, while the digitisation of public services has boosted efficiency.

But from the outset, the Party-state has been deeply concerned about ideological threats emanating from an untamed flow of information. CCP leader Xi Jinping has described cyberspace as a key "battleground" for ensuring "ideological security", warning against "Western permeation" and extolling the importance of "winning online dominance", both at home and abroad.[4] During his tenure, cybersecurity and cyber sovereignty emerged as the key terms in internet governance. International appeals to internet freedom are lambasted as an effort to undermine China's internal cohesion.

The government has spent decades building a sophisticated system of internet controls that uses a combination of technology and regulation to censor domestic information flows and block access to major foreign platforms. Increasingly, it also prevents foreign access to the Chinese information sphere. Regulations and campaigns to create a "civilised", "clean" and "healthy" cyberspace target fraud and misinformation as well as political expression. While the internet in China remains a venue for public expression, with commentators often using allegories and wordplay to discuss social issues, the government has been largely successful in reining in political debates and online public mobilisation. As AI reshapes how citizens engage with the internet, China's government is at the forefront of regulation, requiring developers to ensure content adheres to "socialist core values".

In 2015, Xi Jinping introduced the vision of building "a community of shared future in cyberspace" (网络空间命运共同体).[5] This term has become a cornerstone of China's digital diplomacy, featuring prominently in its 2017 international cooperation strategy on cyberspace and a 2022 white paper.[6] While China calls for international cooperation to prevent cyber-crime and conflicts, it envisions a state-led approach to global internet governance, in which corporations and especially civil society only play a complementary, supportive role.

On the international stage, China regularly calls for efforts to bridge

the global digital divide. Through agreements, loans and digital infrastructure built by Chinese companies, China helps countries expand internet access as well as digital control. And yet a growing number of countries impose restrictions on Chinese platforms and technology providers over data and national security concerns. All of these trends contribute to a fragmentation of the global internet, subverting the vision of a free and open online space.

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Freedom of Religion 【宗教信仰自由】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

Freedom of religion is protected in international human rights law and includes the right to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, practice, and teaching.[1] This freedom may be limited by laws to protect public safety, morals, or the rights of others. Countries take different approaches in regulation. The relationship – or degree of separation – between state and church, or religious organisations, is also shaped by the historical evolution of institutions.

In English translations, China's official documents and statements often refer to "freedom of religion". But the term used in the *Constitution* and regulations is more correctly translated as "freedom of religious belief" (宗教信仰自由). Citizens are free to believe but limited in their right to express their faith. Only "normal religious activities" (正常的宗教活动) defined by the Party State are protected. Laws and policies not only place religion under close supervision, but also require religious organisations to actively propagate CCP ideology through religious content.

Analysis

The Chinese state recognises five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestant faiths. Since the early 1950s, they have been organised and represented by official patriotic associations. According to a 2018 government White Paper, China has more than 200 million registered believers.[2] This does not account for the plethora of traditional folk beliefs. There are also numerous underground churches and religious groups, despite repeated attempts to integrate them into the official structures or disband them.

The CCP itself is secular. Party members are forbidden from following religious beliefs.[3] The Party's relationship with religion has been

fraught and tumultuous. Under Mao, religion was regarded as backward and something to be overcome by force. Practices and publications were banned, and many religious sites destroyed in political campaigns, such as those during the Cultural Revolution. From the mid-1980s, the reform era permitted new space for religious practice and numbers of believers rose significantly.

But the leadership upheld its Marxist convictions that religious beliefs were a "temporary phenomenon" and would fade with economic progress. These expectations were not met. Alongside rising membership in officially recognised religious organisations and unofficial house churches, new movements emerged, most prominently the Falun Gong. After attempts to restrict them resulted in large-scale protests, China's government banned the Falun Gong in 1999, declaring it an "evil cult".[4]

The Party-state remained concerned that religious faith could fuel existential risks for the regime's security. Some of the most prominent human rights activists and lawyers in the 2000s were Christians; advocates for more autonomy in minority areas were often practicing Muslims or Buddhists. From protests and violent clashes in Xinjiang to self-immolation by Tibetan monks and nuns after 2009, the Party identified "misguided" or "extremist" beliefs as root causes – not failed state policies and structural discrimination of minorities. Under Xi, "foreign-originated" Islamic, Catholic, Protestant and Buddhist beliefs have come under further scrutiny. The 2018 White Paper emphasises the need to ensure independence from foreign influence.

Ultimately, the secular Party State demands authority over key religious affairs, as when insisting that the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama follow Chinese law.[5] The distrust in religion is reflected in the tight surveillance of places of worship, especially bigger temples, churches, and mosques. The Party State regards ethnicity and religion as indicators of potential threat in individuals or groups, leading to close monitoring and various restrictions. State policies highlight the arbitrary nature of what is treated as "normal religious practices": While celebration of religious festivities, fasting and praying may be tolerated in other parts of the country and even lauded by China's diplomats abroad, some of these expressions of Muslim faith were interpreted as signs of extremism and cause for deprivation of liberty in Xinjiang.[6]

The past decade was marked by a fundamental change in approach. All religions must now "love the country and the Party", support political stability and promote Chinese mainstream values and national identity. This ambition is reflected in various policy initiatives, from Five-Year Plans for the Sinicisation (中国化) of Islam, Christianity, and

Buddhism, to Daoist education plans including Xi Jinping Thought.[7] Since 2018, the State Administration of Religious Affairs has been placed under the Party's United Front Work Department to strengthen guidance. Places of worship are required to promote Party ideology and policies with banners and by inclusion in sermons, including content shared online.[8] The intention is clear: In today's China, religion must spread the gospel of the CCP.

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Freedom of Speech
【言论自由】

David Bandurski

Brief

Article 35 of China's *Constitution* states that "[c]itizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration".[1] Formally speaking, this language seems to accord with Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression".[2]

In practice, however, the ruling Chinese Communist Party places substantial restrictions on the exercise of freedom of speech, which is regarded as potentially destabilising to the regime. This essentially negates the second half of the freedom of expression clause in the UDHR, which states that "this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". The CCP has developed a vast human and technological apparatus to ensure that it can monitor and control information through all channels, both online and offline, and this means constant, even real-time interference in Chinese nationals' right to enjoy freedom of speech, even beyond China's borders.

Analysis

The story of the media and freedom of speech in China since the 1980s has essentially been about the constant efforts of the CCP leadership to balance the imperative of regime stability against the priorities of reform and development, the latter having resulted in a more complex and diverse society that has often sought ways to assert its rights and interests over and against those of the Party.

As the reform and opening policy took root in China after 1978, there was some reassessment of the extreme state of press control that

had prevailed throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which all press content was dominated by Mao Zedong. The term "news reform" (新闻改革) was used more readily in the early 1980s, and there was a strong conviction as reforms took hold that strict controls over the press and ideology had contributed decisively to the painful political extremes of the previous three decades.[3] It was in the context of this reform spirit that "freedom of speech" was included in China's 1982 *Constitution*.[4] Though the CCP continued to control the press in the 1980s, and journalism and publishing were embedded within the Party-state, there were moves to reassess its role.

This reform trajectory took a dramatic turn with the events of 1989 that culminated in the crackdown on the democracy movement on June 4, resulting in a new regime of speech controls under Jiang Zemin around a policy of "public opinion guidance" (舆论导向). Essentially this reflected a renewed conviction in the leadership that regime stability, and avoiding a Soviet-style collapse, depended upon "guiding" the ideas and opinions of the public through robust CCP control of all channels of expression. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as economic development picked up pace, and as the rise of the internet offered new channels for expression, China went through an unprecedented era of media development. This resulted in a notable rise in professional activity among the Chinese media, and even the emergence of investigative reporting.[5] The mandate of "public opinion guidance" remained firmly in place, however, and journalists and media were constantly disciplined. Meanwhile, from the late 1990s, China developed a vast system of technical and legislative controls for the internet – collectively known as the "Great Firewall" – blocking access to the outside world, and censoring content domestically.[6]

In the Xi Jinping era, controls on the press and the internet have intensified, as the CCP has sought to reassert its dominance over all channels of communication, including the internet and a new generation of social media. In large part this is due to a rise in more free-wheeling media reporting and online engagement and criticism through the 2000s. In February 2016, Xi Jinping re-asserted the CCP's supremacy over the media in a speech in which he reiterated that the media must be "surnamed Party" (姓党), and asking them essentially to pledge their loyalty to the regime.[7] Under the powerful Cyberspace Administration of China, formed directly under the CCP's central leadership in 2014, controls on the internet and social media have intensified. The mandate of "public opinion guidance" has been codified in legal guidelines and extended to all users.[8] Facing criticism of its media control policies, China insists domestically that they are necessary to maintain stability as a prerequisite for development. Officials often stress that "[f]reedom of expression does not equal free expression",

by which they mean that speech must be curtailed in the interests of the general population.[9]

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Friendship
【友谊】

David Bandurski

Brief

All human beings understand friendship, and in today's digital world, this concept spans cultures through virtual "friends" on social media platforms like Facebook and WeChat. The *United Nations Charter* speaks of developing "friendly relations among nations",[1] based on "respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples". The UN's International Day of Friendship promotes peace between peoples, countries, cultures, and individuals.[2]

Within Chinese Communist Party discourse, however, "friendship" has since the 1940s been narrowly defined to focus on the Party-state and its interests. Drawing from Soviet concepts, this understanding carries explicit political expectations of alignment with China's positions. The Party-state fosters "friendship" abroad through institutional proxies - including associations and think tanks — that cloak state involvement while lending the appearance of grassroots consensus to state-directed exchanges. Friendship is highly ritualised, as with the "Friendship Medal" first awarded to Vladimir Putin in 2018,[3] and emotively proclaimed through state propaganda. Yet beneath the veneer of mutual feeling, relationships remain conditioned on accommodating China's core interests, making friendship more about managing perceptions than bridging differences.

Analysis

One of the five human relationships (五伦) identified by Confucius in the sixth century BCE, friendship has endured for centuries in literature and thought of China. The country's current political adaptation of friendship, however, stems directly from the CCP's engagement with the Soviet Union from the 1930s onward. In the Soviet context, Stalin's "Friendship of the Peoples" (*druzhba narodov*) was introduced in 1935 as a metaphor for unified polity of diverse ethnic groups under Soviet Communist Party rule and was applied more broadly to deny dissent and difference.[4] Externally, friendship described Stalin's pursuit of transnational engagement, particularly with the developing

world. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union actively cultivated "good friends" globally, generally pro-Soviet elites, to expand the USSR's sphere of influence. For Soviet partners, often trained at its institutions, friendship meant "accepting and supporting the Soviet state and its foreign policy". Those who did not offer support were regarded as enemies.

Before and after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Soviet notion of friendship shaped the CCP's international engagement. The PRC's first bilateral friendship treaty, signed with the USSR in February 1950, was anticipated months earlier by the formation in Beijing of the China-Russia Friendship Association, joined by CCP elites who had studied in the Soviet Union. Mimicking a quintessentially Soviet practice seen throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the CCP established many such friendship associations from the 1950s. As in the Soviet case, friendship implied acceptance and support of China's foreign policy line, which after 1954 focused on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.[5] From then on, friendship became closely intertwined with non-interference in China's internal affairs, which today remains a foreign policy keystone. In China's official notion of friendship, the point is to project union and sympathy that supports China's core interests and agendas — but beyond this concord, friends must mind their own business.

China's present-day application of friendship is a continuation and elaboration of the older Soviet concept, and the CCP continues to use friendship associations and other exchange to advance international sympathy and accord with China's goals, often to disguise state involvement. The country's numerous sister-city relationships leverage cultural exchanges and local partnerships to advance broader diplomatic goals, with *China Daily* noting that they "hold the key to sound state-to-state relations".[6] On the diplomatic level, affirmations of friendship often signal China's careful calibration of its relationships, not necessarily alliances, as it tries to maintain strategic ambiguity while advancing its interests. This is evidenced by the declaration of "friendship without limits" between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin — a relationship that, in practice, has clear boundaries, such as China's careful refusal to accept Russia's territorial claims in Ukraine.

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Gender Equality
【性别平等】

Malin Oud

Brief

Gender equality signifies equal rights and opportunities for individuals of all genders, ensuring that everyone has the same access to resources and decision-making processes. This principle is established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which asserts that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) further clarifies that discrimination against women includes any distinctions or exclusions based on sex that hinder women's recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, establishing equality with men in all areas.

Mao Zedong's widely cited assertion that "women hold up half the sky" (妇女能顶半边天) has become a symbol of gender equality in China and is frequently referenced in discussions about women's rights. Although the Communist revolution sought to dismantle patriarchal norms by highlighting women's contributions in the workforce and nation-building, traditional gender roles have persisted over the history of the People's Republic. Even today, women face a dual burden, shouldering full-time work while also expected to fulfil their duties at home, including bearing children and caring for husbands, elderly parents, and in-laws.

Analysis

The Communist Party sees itself as a successor to early 20th century progressive movements that had women's rights as a key goal. One of the PRC's first laws was the 1950 Marriage Law, which ended childhood marriages and arranged weddings. The first constitution of the People's Republic of China, enacted in 1954, declared that "Women enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, education,

and social life". The 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing was a pivotal moment for women's rights globally and catalysed the women's movement in China. This event reinvigorated the focus on gender equality, fostering collaboration between Chinese women's organisations and international allies, and prompted the government to enact policies to combat discrimination and violence against women.

Despite these advancements, gender inequality remains entrenched in China thanks to patriarchal structures in society and the Party itself. Reports indicate a widening pay gap, and disparities in parental leave and retirement ages (60 for men, 50-55 for women) reinforce traditional gender roles and impact women's financial independence. Protection of rural women's land rights remains weak. In the Party, no woman is a member of the top-level seven-man Standing Committee of the Politburo or the 24-member Politburo.

Due to China's demographic challenges, including an aging population,the government is urging women to return to their traditional role and bear more children.[1] In his 2023 address to the All-China Women's Federation, Xi called on the federation to "improve and implement policies supporting childbirth, improve the overall quality of the population, and actively respond to population aging".[2] The one-child policy has been abolished, but the CCP reserves the right to command women's reproductive organs.

Violence against women also remains rife. Although the revised Marriage Law introduced in 2001 acknowledged "domestic violence" (家庭暴力) as grounds for divorce, it does not cover marital rape, and cases often go unaddressed by law enforcement. Recent high-profile incidents of gender-based violence and human trafficking have highlighted these issues.[3] The Party also limits discussion to "equality between men and women" (男女平等) instead of the more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender expressed in the term "gender equality" (性别平等), reflecting its renewed support for traditional male and female gender roles.

Women's rights activists face intimidation and reprisals for their work. In 2015, prior to International Women's Day, the "Feminist Five" were detained on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事) for planning a protest against sexual harassment. Nonetheless, Chinese feminists continue to find innovative ways to advocate for women's rights.[4] On an international level, Chinese women's NGOs have successfully carved out spaces for influencing dialogue on gender issues, despite governmental restrictions.[5] Women's choices not to marry or have children can also be seen as a sign of their power to disobey the patriarchal state.

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Globalisation 【全球化】

Malin Oud

Brief

Globalisation refers to the process of increasing integration and interdependence among nations, characterised by the flow of goods, services, information, and capital across borders. Early forms of globalisation emerged during the 15th and 16th centuries, when European powers expanded their trade networks and established colonies. The term "globalisation" itself became popular in the late 20th century, with the end of the Cold War, the shift towards market-oriented economies, advancements in technology and transportation, and the rise of the internet. From the Soviet Union's collapse until the 2008 financial crisis, the dominant Western narrative celebrated economic globalisation and free trade as pathways to peace and prosperity.[1] Since the late 1990s, however, critics have called into question the desirability of a neoliberal international economic order, raising concerns about economic security, national sovereignty, and social equity.

Amidst rising anti-globalisation sentiments in the West, China has emerged as one of its main defenders. In his speech in front of political and industrial leaders at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, Xi Jinping mentioned "globalisation" 24 times to much acclaim. But beneath this seemingly neutral term lies a less idealistic agenda: globalisation with Chinese characteristics is primarily about guarding against Western influence and making other countries more dependent on China.

Analysis

The PRC leadership's attitude toward the global economy has always been characterised by a strong stance of self-sufficiency (自力更生) and economic independence. While recognising economic globalisation as an inevitable trend that presents historical opportunities for China, the leadership has from the outset cautioned about potential risks and losses if this process is not managed effectively. Nevertheless, China decided to "bravely take part in economic globalisation"[2] while emphasising national security and self-reliance.

While China argues for the benefits of economic integration, it maintains major restrictions and strict controls over its own markets and information flows. Since joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China has leveraged its developing country status to navigate integration into the global economy while benefiting from certain advantages available to developing economies, such as access to transitional measures for subsidies and the ability to protect specific sectors vulnerable to international competition.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when China primarily exported simple manufactured goods, deep trade ties raised few security concerns. However, as Chinese companies began to dominate cutting-edge technology and production of critical goods like rare earth metals, this interdependence with China began to be viewed with more scepticism.[3] Globalisation has been significantly driven by the trade of semiconductors and the electronic products they enable, resulting in an interdependent global supply chain for microchips. This dependency has created vulnerabilities that both China and the US are eager to leverage, turning semiconductor technology into a key arena in the ongoing great power rivalry, and creating a dynamic where for many leading companies, their primary customer is also their main competitor. [4] This dynamic also helps to explain why the CEO of the Swedish telecom business Ericsson went on a lobbying campaign on behalf of its main competitor Huawei, protesting the way Sweden barred Huawei equipment from the country's 5G networks over national-security concerns after Beijing had threatened to retaliate against Ericsson's business in China.[5]

The current global trend of viewing economic interactions through a lens of national security reflects a shift in both how China and other nations perceive globalisation. Decoupling pressures are emanating from both the West and China as each becomes increasingly concerned about weaponised interdependence. In response to its increasing dependence on foreign semiconductors, China has implemented a "dual circulation" (国内国际双循环) strategy and plans such as "Made in China 2025", which seek to reduce China's vulnerability by increasing domestic consumption and through acquisition of foreign companies, technology transfer, substantial support for domestic chip firms, and significant investments in R&D. Indeed, China started "de-risking" long before the concept became a thing in Brussels.[6]

Meanwhile, in the wake of the Trump administration's retreat from the WTO and other multilateral institutions, Xi calls on other world leaders to resist U.S. unilateralism, protectionism and decoupling. In so doing, he positions China as a responsible major country and proponent of inclusive economic globalisation (包容性经济全球化) supporting less developed countries through low tariffs and investments.[7]

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Good Governance 【良政善治】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

The term "good governance" (善治) was first mentioned in a high-level Party document from 2014.[1] Today, it is firmly established in the political vernacular. In Party-state discourse, the focus is on the efficient provision of public services, combatting corruption and abuses of power within the CCP, and establishing law-based governance, i.e., codifying policies and measures in laws and regulations. The primary objectives are to increase prosperity and safeguard collective rights, most importantly public order and security, rather than the institutionalised political participation of independent non-governmental actors and citizens. Increased monitoring by digital means and laws and regulations that severely restrict individual liberties are regularly characterised as good governance.

This is markedly different from the broader definitions of good governance set out by the UN and the EU, which encompass factors such as efficiency, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, the rule of law, civic participation and the protection of social minorities.[2] The UN and EU frameworks explicitly envisage close cooperation with non-governmental actors and place a strong emphasis on the protection of human rights, including civil and political rights.

Analysis

Use of the term good governance in Chinese official discourse took off in the early 2000s, in step with global discussions around good governance. In the UN framework the term has expanded to include civil rights protection, public participation and the involvement of non-governmental actors in all public affairs, whereas party-affiliated academics and officials have criticised this "catch all" approach and argued for staying close to the concept's original definition in administrative science.[3] This means focusing on efficient governance,

containing corruption and abuses of power and strengthening the legal and regulatory framework, rather than granting institutionalised rights to citizens and non-governmental stakeholders to have a say.

The main focus instead is on the material benefits and the sense of progress and individual gain (获得感) for individual citizens granted by the state.[4] Especially in the context of COVID-19, the Chinese system of governance has been promoted as a viable and ultimately superior alternative in safeguarding and providing public goods such as safety and health, one not constrained by a focus on individual rights and interests. This focus on output legitimacy is also reflected in the terminology (良政善治). The most often used word *shanzhi* (善治) might be better translated as "benevolent" governance. The term is derived from traditional political philosophy and is framed by the political leadership as a continuation of Chinese schools of thought.[5] The term *lianzheng* (廉政), often used synonymously or in conjunction with *shanzhi*, denotes incorrupt or "clean" governance.

This narrow interpretation is in line with the political-ideological discourse of the CCP that emphasises absolute Party leadership, which was further encoded in the Chinese *Constitution* in 2018. The primary goal is to ensure that the CCP fulfils its role in governing the country well. Public order, social stability – i.e., the absence of protests – and provision of economic growth are seen as key benchmarks of success. The strong emphasis on the higher common goods of public order and security means that even laws that heavily restrict civil liberties are seen as important pillars of good governance. For example, the introduction of the *National Security Law for Hong Kong* and of coercive re-education measures in Xinjiang were hailed as steps towards good governance, despite conflicts with international human rights norms.[6]

The concept of good governance is also closely tied to new initiatives expanding the use of digital technologies. Xi Jinping has been promoting the new concept of monitoring-based "smart governance", i.e., tight, digitally supported supervision and disciplinary governance of public institutions, companies and citizens alike.[7] The drive to modernise governance emphasises technocratic, data-based control under centralised CCP leadership and supervision, rather than sharing watch-dog responsibilities with non-governmental actors or the media. This model is presented as more efficient and ultimately superior to the Western approach to governance, and its focus on the rule of law and the supervision of state power through the separation of powers and press freedom.[8]

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History
【历史】

David Bandurski

Brief

According to one globally shared view of history, its study informs human behaviour. Even in China, George Santayana's famous words, "[t]hose who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", have the familiar ring of truth.[1] But history's constant exploitation is also a fact across much of the world. Following the tradition of "correct" history writing laid down in the Soviet Union under Stalin in 1938,[2] China's ruling Communist Party has long viewed the shaping of history as a crucial means of justifying and defending the regime. Under Xi Jinping since late 2012, the emphasis on the Party's official vision of history as a source of power and legitimacy has only strengthened.[3]

Analysis

Since its origin in the 1920s, the Chinese Communist Party has adhered to a materialist conception of history,[4] a doctrine of linear historical progress proceeding through class struggle. Armed with this socialist historiography, Mao Zedong established himself as China's revolutionary leader in the 1940s, and in the decades that followed this conception of history legitimised the CCP as a revolutionary and ruling Party. In the CCP's first formal resolution on history in 1945, Mao Zedong summarised the key political lessons since the Party's founding in 1921. The resolution, which followed Mao's successful purging of his political opposition, focused criticism on the supposed damage caused in the preceding decade by "left-leaning opportunism", and formalised Mao's supremacy, laying the foundation for catastrophic failure of the Cultural Revolution – a decade hugely destructive to China's cultural heritage.

After Mao's death, the CCP set off on a new path of reform and opening. A new consensus on history was required to explain the failings of the Mao era and consolidate the foundation of power under the reform agenda. This came in 1981 with Deng Xiaoping's *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the PRC* (关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议),[5] which served to

reframe the reform project and settle the question of the "erroneous theories and practices" of the Cultural Revolution, while not undermining Mao's revolutionary role, insisting that Mao's "contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes".[6]

Similarly, the CCP's third resolution on history, the November 2021 *Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Hundred-Year Struggle* (中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议), declared a new direction for the CCP and reconsolidated its claim to power under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The resolution, which established Xi as the pioneer and charismatic leader of a "New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (中国特色社会主义新时代), cemented his power and legacy. Xi's "New Era", a period covering less than one-tenth of the CCP's 100-year history, occupied more than half of the resolution text.

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has sharpened its focus on the Party's revolutionary history. It has spoken in the official media of "red genes" (红色基因), referring to the revolutionary spirit and Party's history as a political and cultural inheritance of the Chinese people,[7] and has even sought to safeguard its revolutionary legacy with campaigns against "historical nihilism"[8] – meaning denial of the Party's official history and its materialist historical development – and legislation against the defaming of heroes.[9] Also under Xi Jinping, there has been a renewed focus on China's "excellent traditional culture" as a resource of Party legitimacy, seen particularly in Xi's 2012 notion of the "Chinese Dream of a great rejuvenation of the Chinese people". This idea posits China's return, after more than a century of humiliation at the hands of the West, to the centre of the world stage – a position, according to current CCP historiography, that Chinese civilisation held for much of its own history.[10]

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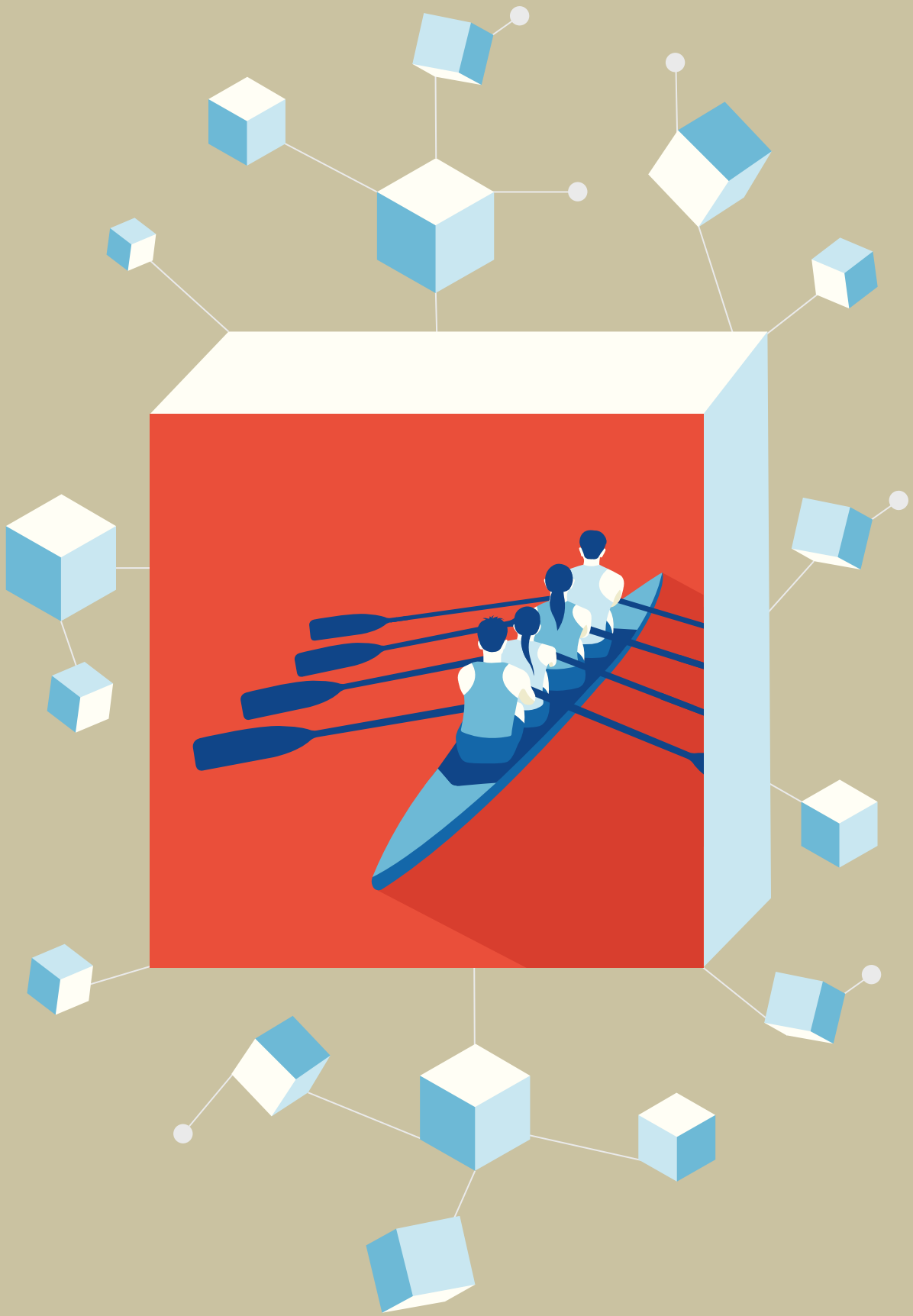

Human Rights 【人权】

Malin Oud

Brief

Human rights are rights intrinsic to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) was adopted in 1948 as a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations".[1] International human rights law lays down the obligations of governments to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts in order to promote, protect and fulfil the human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups.

For political reasons, when the rights listed in the UDHR were codified into legally binding instruments, they were divided into two separate covenants: the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR).

China has ratified the ICESCR, but not the ICCPR, maintaining that sovereignty and non-interference trump the notion of universal human rights. Instead, China considers human rights to be a country's "internal affairs" rather than a legitimate concern of the international community. China promotes a state-centric and relativist conception of human rights "with Chinese characteristics", according to which stability, harmony, subsistence and economic development take precedence over human rights, especially civil and political rights.[2]

Analysis

China published its first White Paper on Human Rights in 1991.[3] Issued in response to international criticism of the government crackdown on protesters on Tiananmen Square in 1989, the paper states that China has a different understanding of human rights than the West due to its different national and historical conditions. The paper nevertheless

marked a shift in government policy away from outright rejection of human rights as a "bourgeois" concept to a position of partial and reluctant acceptance of international human rights standards and principles. China has ratified six of the nine core human rights conventions, but has at the same time always maintained that the "right to subsistence" (生存权), a right which does not exist in international human rights law, and the right to development (发展权) are the "foremost human rights". At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna at the end of the Cold War to affirm the universality and indivisibility of all human rights, China stated:

> **For the vast number of developing countries to respect and protect human rights is first and foremost to ensure full realisation of the rights to subsistence and development. The argument that human rights are the precondition for development is unfounded. When poverty and lack of adequate food and clothing are commonplace and people's basic needs are not guaranteed, priority should be given to economic development. Otherwise, human rights are completely out of the question.**[4]

Confidence in "the Chinese model" was boosted by the global financial crisis in 2008. At the same time, so-called "colour" revolutions in a number of countries in the early 2000s gave rise to a heightened sense of external threat in Beijing. In 2013, a notice issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's General Office called for strengthened Party leadership and management of the "ideological battlefield". The document, commonly referred to as *Document 9*, cautioned against seven perils seen as threatening to undermine the Communist Party, including the promotion of universal values.[5]

In the last ten years, Beijing's approach to the international human rights system has shifted from a defensive attitude to a more proactive strategy. China has become an international norm entrepreneur that is seeking to "break Western human rights hegemony" (打破西方人权霸权) and change "international human rights governance".[6] In a series of high-profile speeches at the World Economic Forum in Davos, and at the United Nations in Geneva and New York in 2017, Xi Jinping launched the concept of "a community of shared destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体), a vision for a world order that emphasises sovereignty, respect for different political systems, and "win-win cooperation" (合作共赢) among states.[7]

In 2017, the concept of a "community of shared future" was inserted into a resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council entitled "The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human

Rights".[8] In June 2020, the council adopted a China-sponsored resolution entitled "Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights", advocating an international human rights system based on cooperation between states, rather than accountability and the rights of individuals.[9]

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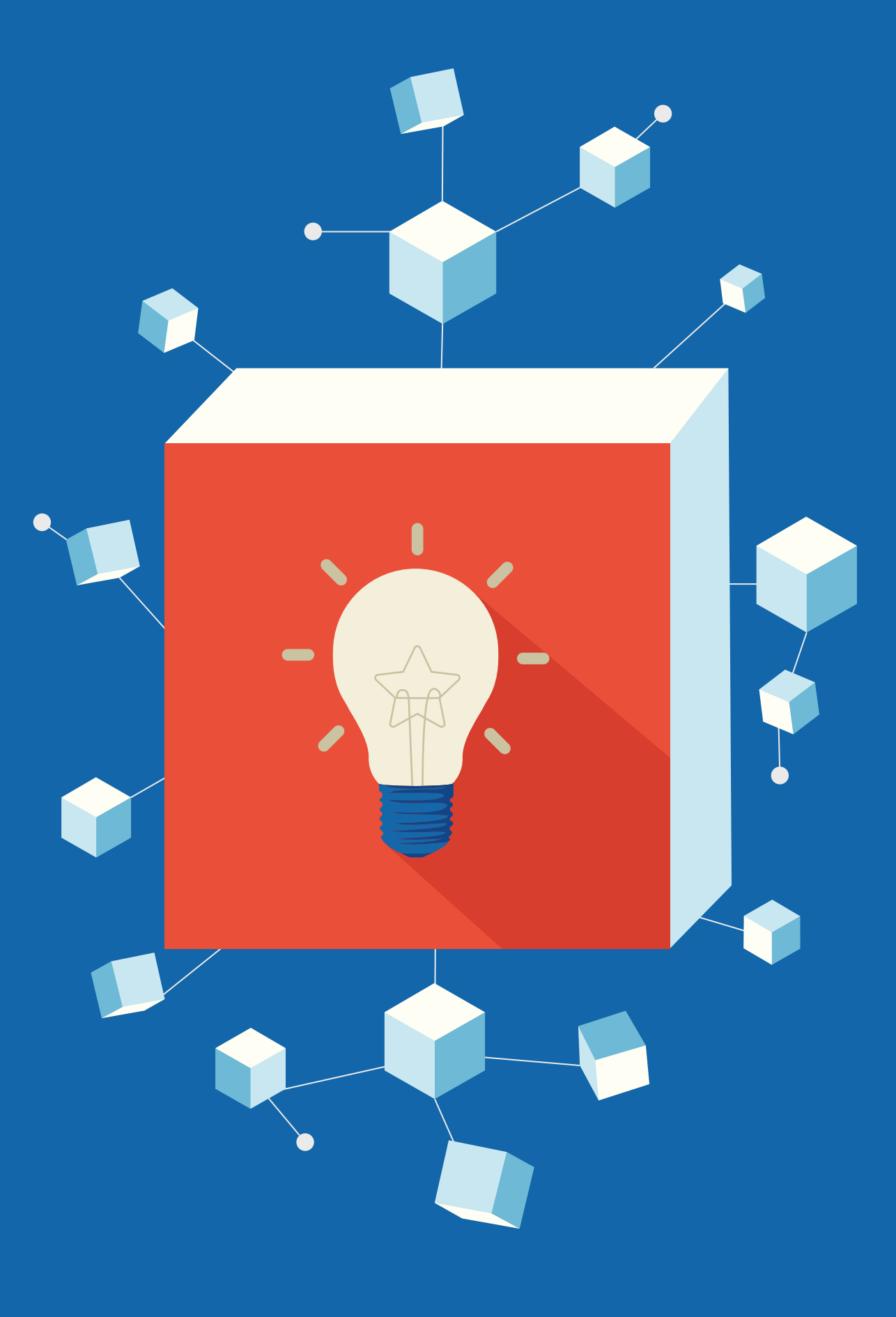

Innovation
【创新】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

Innovation means the creation and adoption of new ideas, approaches or products. The UN views scientific and technological innovation as key for economic growth and sustainable development, offering potential solutions for global challenges such as inequality, food security, or climate adaptation.[1] The UN also highlights the benefits of "social innovation" by improving governance and empowering civil society. In comparison, national innovation agendas often place a stronger emphasis on economic competitiveness and military strength.

Innovation is central to the CCP's vision of modernising its economy and managing society. Decades of policy plans, investment, and private sector competition have made China a global innovation leader, technology exporter, and standard-setter. The state directs resources to applied innovation in emerging technologies and strategic sectors, including military and security applications. Indigenous innovation (自主创新) is gaining importance as the country strives to decrease dependencies and cement its position as a science and technology power.[2]

Analysis

Under Xi Jinping, innovation has become one of the most prominent terms in the CCP's vocabulary. It is seen as crucial for China's modernisation and shift towards a new development model focused on digitisation, automation and cutting-edge industries. Party documents and media regularly highlight the need to lead the next industrial revolution. This push is fuelled by fierce technological competition with the US and increasing restrictions of high-tech exports to China, especially on advanced chips and chip-making equipment.

The concept of innovation has been part of CCP discourse since the 1940s, historically tied to self-reliance and renewal. In the 1950s and '60s, it signified progress in science and production. From the early reform period in the 1980s and 1990s, China's industrial policy aimed

to catch up with developed economies, shifting from production efficiency to advances in electronic goods and information technology. In the 1990s and 2000s, economic policy and regulations required foreign investors to transfer technology to help build China's own innovation capacity. Research centres and companies were encouraged to "transfer, digest, absorb, and re-innovate" foreign technologies.[3]

Xi has promised to move Chinese industries to the high-end of the global value chain. The 2015 "Made in China 2025" plan aimed to make the PRC a global leader in key manufacturing sectors. Since 2020, the ambition has shifted to leading technological breakthroughs. The government provides national research grants, state guidance funds and other incentives to promote research and development in emerging technologies and strategic sectors such as green tech, biotech, quantum computing, AI, and new telecommunication standards. The military-civil fusion policy and the use of technology in public security and surveillance are also major drivers of technological innovation.

China has defied assumptions about the importance of a liberal political environment for innovation. In 2024, it ranked 11th out of 133 economies on the Global Innovation Index and is a leader in new patent registrations.[4] China's private sector has a multitude of companies pursuing innovation - often in fierce competition. From Huawei to TikTok, Temu, and DeepSeek, Chinese technology companies have become globally renowned champions. A regulatory crackdown in the early 2020s has ensured that private sector efforts largely align with national strategic goals. Innovation will remain central in the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), with an emphasis on foundational research and talent development to boost indigenous innovation.

Universities, enterprises and investors across the world are now keen to partake in China's technological advances. The government shares benefits while protecting China's edge. The PRC frames its technology exports as a global public good and strives to promote the Belt and Road Initiative as a "road of innovation," alongside a host of bilateral projects.[5] China is also active in various UN initiatives, often focusing on the green transition such as in the SDGs Innovation Lab in Suzhou.[6] The leadership in innovation gives China a powerful voice in the contested space of setting international standards for telecommunications, internet and AI governance.

Innovation also features frequently in the Party's discourse on governance. From Mao to Xi, leaders are credited with adapting Marxist ideology and political practices to China's conditions and changing times. Xi has tasked the Party with "innovating social governance" to ensure stability and prosperity. This notion of social innovation entails using new digital tools for both public service provision and political

control, making such efforts a part of official research and innovation agendas.[7]

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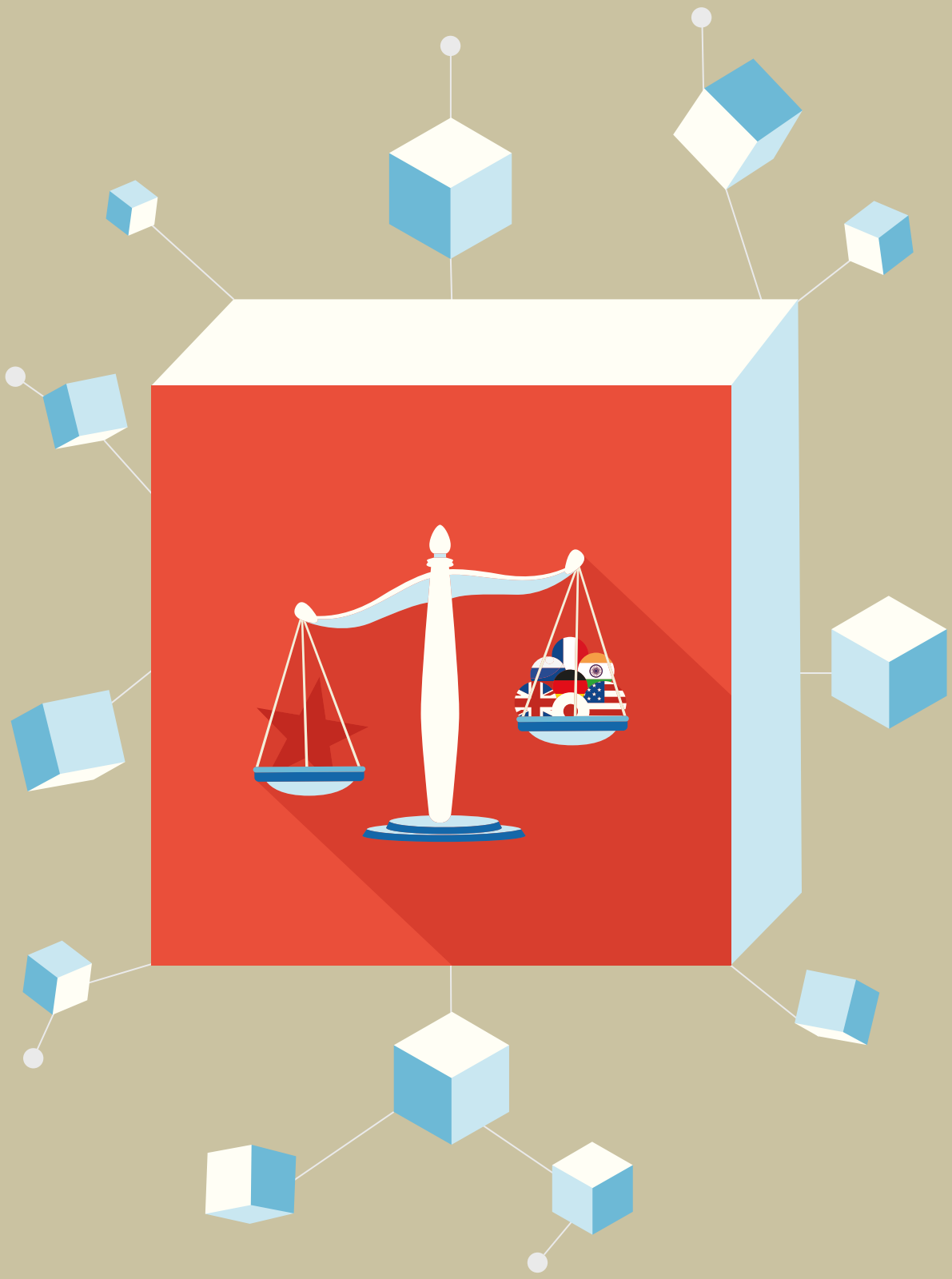

International Law
【国际法】

Malin Oud

Brief

International law is the body of rules and principles regulating the relations between states and other international actors. Based on treaties and customary law, it is an evolving concept that can be traced back some four hundred years. Fundamentally, international law requires respect for the sovereign equality of states, which means that states generally have the discretion to accept or reject proposed new international law. Since the adoption of the UN Charter in 1945, international law has expanded to prohibit the use of force against another state and to encompass human rights, humanitarian law, and accountability for international crimes such as genocide and crimes against humanity, as well as to address emerging concerns like space law, internet regulation, and environmental law.

In China's understanding, the core principles of international law are state sovereignty, non-aggression, and non-interference.[1] China views the liberal, post-World War II model of international law that has been dominant since the 1990s as a tool of Western hegemony and interventionism. Since 2015, China has put forward the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) on the international stage, emphasising "common" rather than universal values. This is presented as a more inclusive, democratic, and fair model than the current international system.

Analysis

The PRC took its seat as "the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations" in 1971.[2] Before the reform and opening policy launched in 1978, China was largely an outsider to the international law system. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, China abandoned the ideological struggle against the capitalist West that had marked the Mao era, and instead became an active participant in key

international organisations and frameworks. It ratified core treaties on trade and investment, as well as some human rights treaties. China's approach to international law has been instrumental and selective, leveraging rules that are advantageous to its development and eschewing rules that could bring disadvantages.[3] Prominent examples are China's insistence on its status as a "developing country" in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its unilateral claims regarding the South China Sea.

China does not seek to replace the established UN-centred international system, but to reshape those parts of international law that conflict with its national interests.[4] Ever since Deng Xiaoping's first speech at the UN in 1974, China has cultivated an image of a peaceful developing country and responsible great power with no hegemonic intentions, which it contrasts with Western imperialism and the West's historically self-serving role in creating international rules.[5] From its own perspective, China is the real guardian of international law. For example, the leadership argues that it was "not violating but upholding the authority and dignity of international law" by not recognising the 2016 international arbitration ruling on conflicting territorial claims between the PRC and the Philippines in the South China Sea.[6] UN investigations of the human rights situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang are routinely discarded as "interference in China's internal affairs" and "smear campaigns" orchestrated by the West.[7]

In the last decade under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has evolved from rule-taker to aspiring rule-maker at the UN. Spurred by an increasing concern with security and stability in the face of uncertain global economic trends and democratic uprisings in other parts of the world, Party-state discourse now clearly promotes a Chinese model of governance. This model combines commitment to economic globalisation with the reaffirmation of a strong state not bound by liberal democratic checks.[8] Xi's vision of international order emphasises state sovereignty, non-interference and "win-win cooperation" theoretically based on "common values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom".[9] In essence, China seeks to return to a pre-World War II understanding of international law where human rights are an internal matter of states.

As China's economic and political clout grows, so does its ambition to expand the reach of its domestic laws and seek jurisdiction abroad.[10] For example, the 2003 *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Convention on Countering Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism* has been used to quell "security threats" in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and to extradite suspects and dissidents at China's behest.[11] In this light, Xi's project to construct "foreign related rule of law" (涉外法治) and a "legal

system applicable outside the jurisdiction of our country" has important implications for the future of international law.[12]

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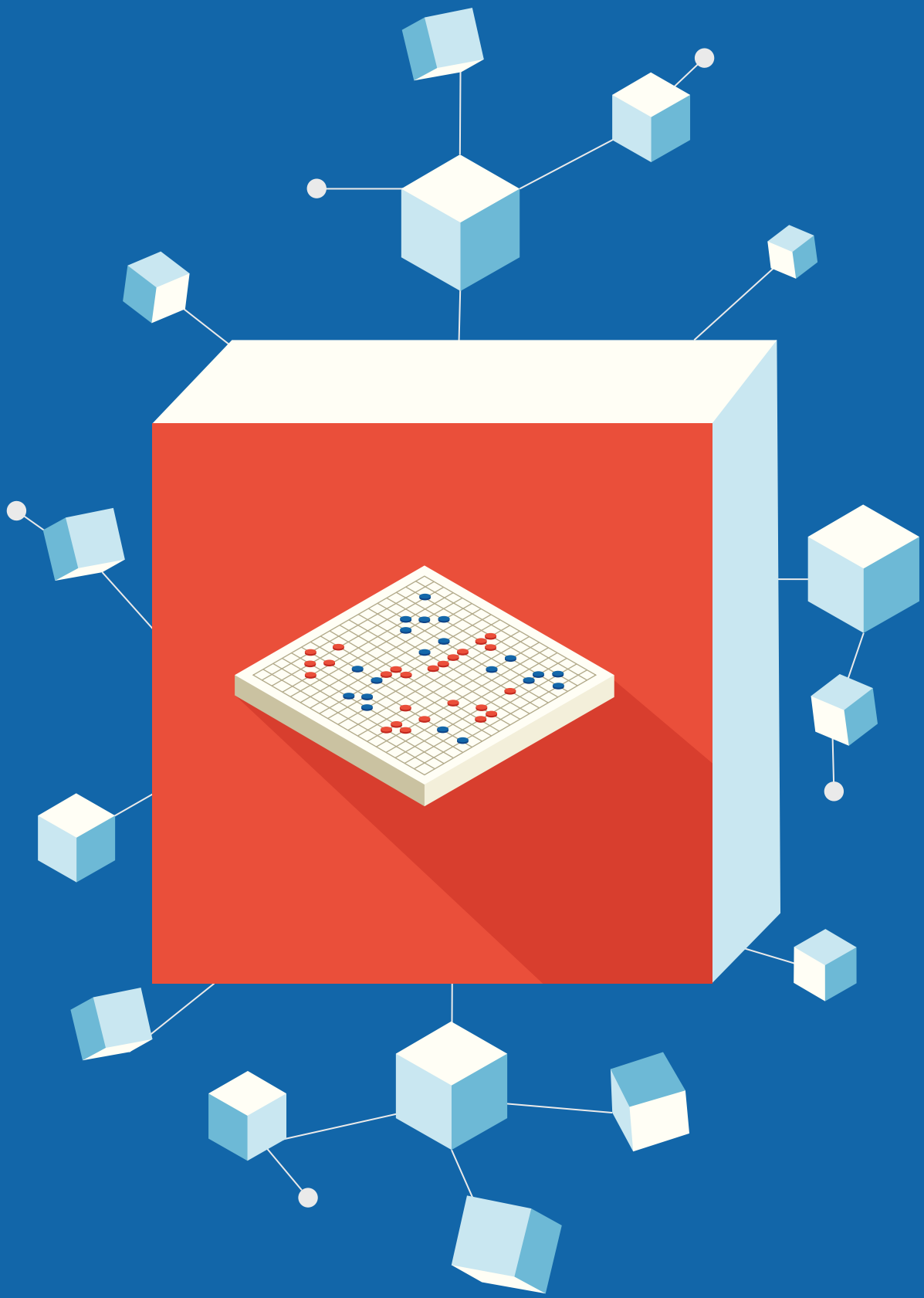

International Relations
【国际关系】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

In mainstream usage, "international relations" refers to the study and practice of political, economic, and security interactions among states and other global actors, including international organisations, corporations, and non-state groups. The UN Charter codifies key principles such as the sovereign equality of states, prohibition of force and commitment to peaceful dispute resolution, non-intervention, and respect for human rights.

In Chinese official discourse, "international relations" (国际关系) denotes not merely to the study or practice of relations, but a normative vision of how relations ought to be conducted. A "new type of international relations" (新型国际关系), characterised by mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation" is a core concept within Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy.[1] Framing itself as defender of the UN Charter, China calls for a "democratisation of international relations" (国际关系民主化), in opposition to what it depicts as Western interventionism undermining the sovereignty and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries under the banner of democracy and human rights.[2]

Analysis

China's "basic norms of international relations" (国际关系的基本准则) are officially rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Originally formulated in 1954, they were promoted during the Mao era as the foundation of modern international relations, countering what China saw as US-led "hegemonism" and "power politics".[3] From the outset, these principles served to defend China's core interests: support for Taiwan independence or criticism

over Tibet policy were framed as violating the basic norms of international relations, specifically the principle of non-interference.

The "new type of international relations" initially referred to ties within the socialist camp, especially with the USSR, defined by Leninist "proletarian internationalism" – promoted by China as a model relationship until the 1963 Sino-Soviet split reframed the USSR as a violator of international norms.

From the 1970s onward, China borrowed the Non-Aligned Movement's rhetoric on the democratisation of international relations, linking sovereignty and opposition to "big power hegemonism" of the US and USSR with advocacy for greater agency for the Third World in global governance. The principle of "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity" was regularly invoked to condemn U.S. interventions, such as in Libya and Iraq, and to oppose humanitarian interventions more broadly. In the 2000s, Hu Jintao elevated "jointly advancing the democratisation of international relations" to a flagship slogan, but his state-centric reading equated democracy with equality among states rather than democracy within states.

This historical trajectory laid the groundwork for how under Xi Jinping, the CCP's use of international relations embeds a dual counternarrative. First, a normative claim: China presents itself as a defender of basic norms – such as the Five Principles and the UN Charter – against what it labels as Western selective application, unilateral sanctions, and interventionism.[4] Second, a strategic positioning: democratisation of international relations implies redistributing power toward developing countries and emerging powers without embracing liberal-democratic norms.[5] This vision is explicitly state-centric, defining "interventionism" broadly to include external criticism, which is framed as a violation of sovereignty.

Though *guoji guanxi* is the standard Chinese term for international relations, *guanxi* – its second component – carries a culturally specific meaning that goes beyond neutral "relations". Originating from Confucian thought, *guanxi* denotes a form of social capital embedded in reciprocal personal ties, where ongoing exchanges of favours generate durable networks of obligation, trust, and mutual recognition. Applied to the global sphere, international relations are fundamentally understood as human relations, with guanxi – the ability to manage them – constituting a key source of power.[6] Accordingly, ceremonial banquets and summit diplomacy – used to give face, reinforce status recognition, and create a network of reciprocal obligations – occupy a central place in China's foreign policy.

The Chinese government expects international relations scholarship to serve national rejuvenation by producing theories with "Chinese characteristics" that embody China's values, perspectives, and historical experience. It envisions the discipline as a tool to enhance China's voice in global governance, promote its preferred norms, and support a multipolar, sovereignty-cantered international order.[7] Under Xi, research funding has increasingly focused on his ideological concepts, with area studies elevated to a first-tier discipline, fostering scholarship with state priorities.

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Journalism
【新闻学】

David Bandurski

Brief

Journalism, defined as the "activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information",[1] is crucial to the protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.[2] A 2012 UN Human Rights Council report stressed that journalism is core to citizens' exercise of their right to "seek and receive information".

Over the past 10 years, the CCP has explicitly rejected this view of the role of journalism,[3] upholding instead the *Marxist View of Journalism*, which places the Party's interests at the heart of press activity and demands journalists uphold a "correct political direction" and "emphasise positive propaganda".[4] However, the CCP's recent categorical rejection of public-interest journalism ignores the complexity of journalism's role in the Party's century-long history. A critical look reveals competing views of the role of the press and journalism that contradict current propaganda about "the West's idea of journalism" as radically opposed to China's.

Analysis

China's modern political history runs alongside a rich history of professional journalism balanced against the CCP's claims to journalism as a tool of Party rule. As Mao Zedong rose to power in the 1940s, he echoed Leninist views, and in a famous 1942 speech on the arts, he affirmed the need for "Party spirit" (党性), a translation of the Russian *partiinost*, meaning adherence to the CCP's political direction.[5]

But despite this Maoist orthodoxy, views on the role of journalism within the CCP were more complicated. In April 1950, months after the PRC's founding, a decision urged newspapers and periodicals, without government interference, "[to] include the masses in regular and systematic supervision".[6] The notion was short-lived. Reports about Party negligence unsettled the leadership, and in July 1954, a new decision gave officials greater control over media in the name of "Party spirit".[7] During the brief Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956-57,

journalists railed against restrictions, but many were swept up in the ensuing Anti-Rightist Movement.

In 1979, not long after China initiated the reform and opening policy following the Cultural Revolution, the country's top communications journal republished the full text of the original 1950 decision on press supervision, noting that it could have "an important role" in "news reform", which included aspirations such as less rigid writing and even exposure of official corruption.[8] One prominent debate was between the liberal *People's Daily* editor-in-chief Hu Jiwei, who said newspapers embodied "people spirit" – meaning a public interest role, and the leftist official Hu Qiaomu, who urged the supremacy of "Party spirit".[9] The debate culminated with the Party's brutal 1989 crackdown on the democracy movement, after which liberal press policies were blamed for the protests.

In the 1990s and 2000s, even as controls persisted under the concept of "public opinion guidance",[10] broader economic change, media commercialisation, and the rise of the internet created opportunities for journalists to reassert a professional role. The period saw the rise of investigative reporting, which the country's premier Zhu Rongji in October 1998 referred to as "a mirror on the government".[11] In the absence of checks on the abuse of power, citizens often turned to journalists as a source of justice, and so-called "citizen journalism" also made headway as a separate source of information.[12]

Since Xi Jinping's rise to power in late 2012, journalism's gains have dramatically reversed. High-level prohibitions in 2013 included the CCP's rejection of what it called "the West's idea of journalism" as a direct challenge to the Party's control of the media and publishing system.[13] Since that time, the Party has championed the *Marxist View of Journalism*, rigidly opposing China's journalism values to those of an abstracted West. Instead, authorities have stressed the need for "positive energy", which obliges not just journalists but all networked citizens to be defenders of the Party and the national image.[14]

In his first major speech on media policy in February 2016, Xi Jinping said media "must be surnamed Party", a play on surname and spirit as Chinese homophones, and a clear echo of earlier authoritarian turns that referenced Mao's "Party spirit". In fact, Xi's speech went further in asserting that the notion of "people spirit", a reference to the liberal strand of journalism, had "always been the same" as the "Party spirit."[15] As the Party by definition struggled on behalf of the people, all journalistic work by media enjoined to "love the Party, protect the Party and serve the Party" was essentially public interest journalism.[16]

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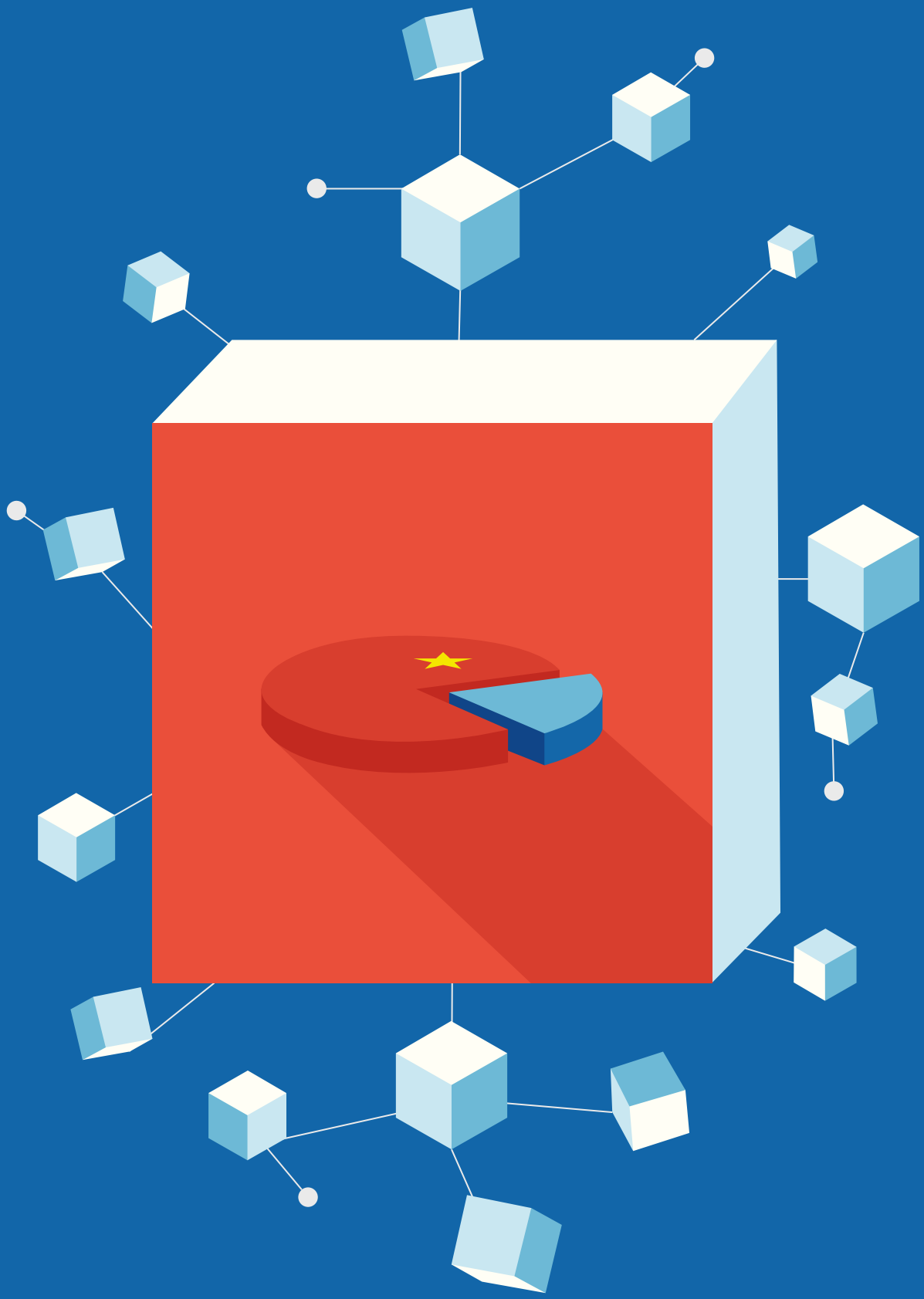

Market Economy
【市场经济】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development defines a market economy as "a national economy of a country that relies heavily upon market forces to determine levels of production, consumption, investment, and savings without government intervention".[1]

China began its transition from a socialist command economy four decades ago, and since the early 1990s it calls itself a "socialist market economy" under which markets were to extend to all main sectors of the economy. Following years of market-led growth, China's current model is characterised by more government influence over the economy than in the past, and then is found in most middle-income and developed economies, with a prominent role given to state banks, firms, and government five-year plans. This model is sometimes referred to as Market-Leninism.

The Chinese Party State actively manages competition, often favouring state-owned enterprises and national champions over private firms, particularly in strategic sectors. Market access can be restricted based on political and strategic considerations rather than purely economic factors, which is a point of contention when discussing free market principles.[2] Since taking power in 2012, Xi Jinping has increasingly stressed national security and self-sufficiency as paramount to economic openness, underlining how China's homegrown version of a market economy is unlikely to give market forces free rein at the expense of state control.

Analysis

Following spontaneous experiments with individual household agriculture in the late 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gradually

relaxed control of farming and then urban economic activity. It permitted private businesses and foreign investment.

The concept of "socialist market economy" was endorsed by the 14th Congress of the Communist Party in 1992 and was enshrined in the PRC constitution in 1993, when it replaced "planned economy on the basis of socialist public ownership" as China's national economic system.[3]

After decades of protectionism and state economic planning under Mao, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, had to avoid the impression that he was challenging Mao's legacy. Deng, however, famously declared that "it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice," signalling pragmatism about market mechanisms.

With the socialist market economy model Deng focused on economic growth as the primary goal. Nevertheless, he maintained that the state had to play a leading role in economic planning and development. The ultimate control over strategic sectors would be retained by the Communist Party, which had to maintain its prerogative to intervene extensively in market operations when called for.

In preparation for its accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China adopted a range of market-opening measures which continued during the early days of its WTO membership and contributed to over a decade of double-digit economic growth. None of these policies, however, challenged the strategy of the state maintaining a leading role in what were regarded as strategic industries, such as steel, energy, autos, aerospace, shipbuilding, and military industries.

Shortly after assuming power in 2012, Xi Jinping articulated a vision of market mechanisms playing a pivotal role in resource allocation. Progress has, however, been limited. Few of the reforms that Xi envisioned have been carried out and the Party's role in the economy has instead become even more pronounced.[4] Prominent Chinese economist Mao Yushi, an outspoken critic of the government's failure to reduce public ownership, has argued that the state's dominance in the domestic market "is just as if a referee would join a football game". [5]

In recent years, these policies have spurred some Western economies to address dependency on China and to boost domestic competitiveness. Chinese officials have responded by portraying calls for balanced and fair trade, and efforts to respond to industrial overcapacity in China, as a pretext for Western protectionist policies.[6] Meanwhile, China has rhetorically embraced economic globalisation, notably reflected by Xi Jinping's keynote address at the World Economic Forum in 2017, where he appeared as a champion of free and open

global markets.[7] Despite China's own shortcomings in terms of market openness, these narratives have gained traction, not least in the Global South, especially as some Western countries have increased their own protectionist and statist policies.

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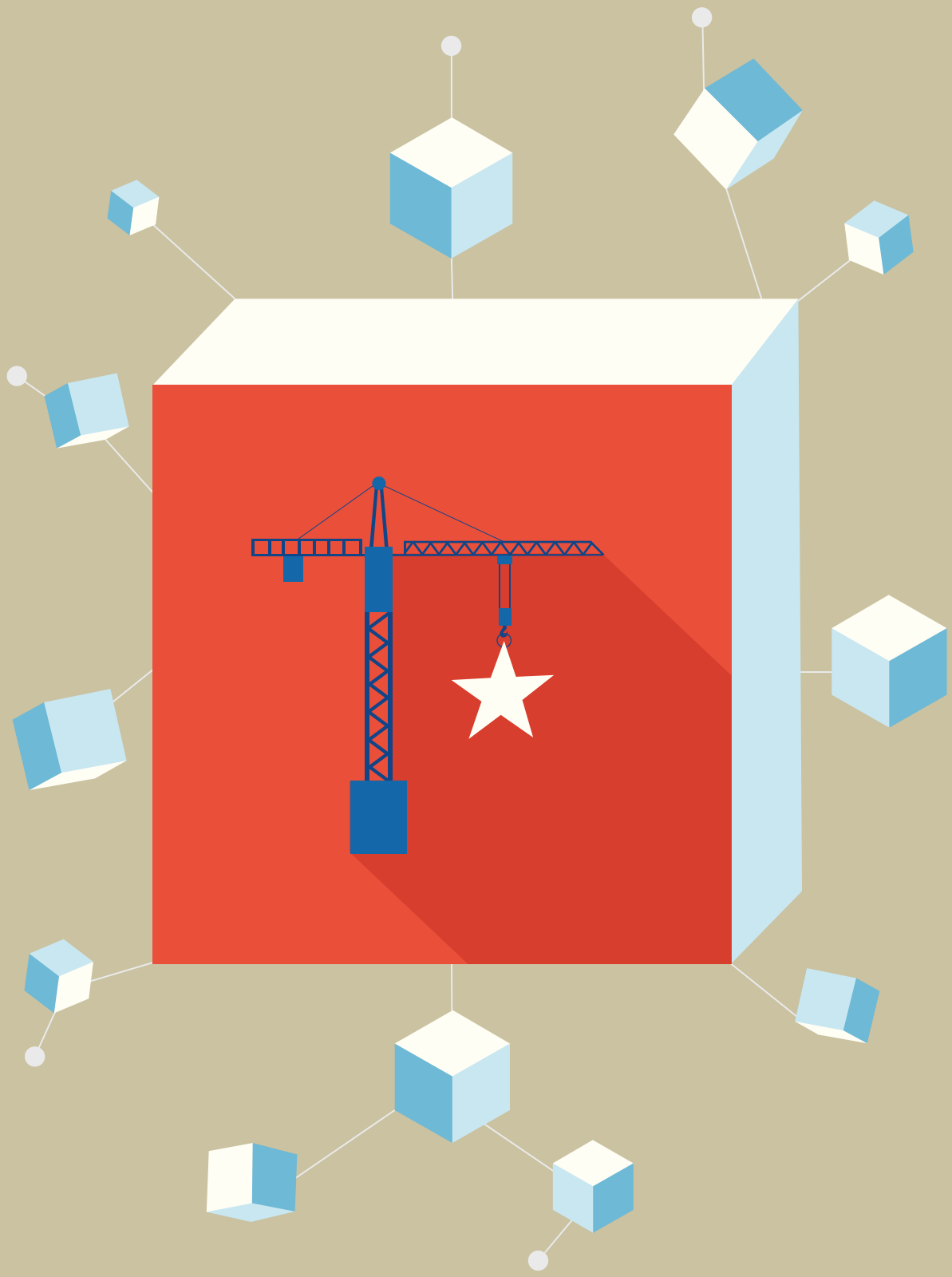

Modernisation 【现代化】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

A globally shared view holds modernity as closely linked to progress. Modernisation is the process of development from a "pre-modern" or "traditional" to a "modern" society. In Western thought, modernisation has been associated not only with technological advancement but also with secularisation, democratisation, and advancement of human rights. It is intimately linked to the ideas of enlightenment and rationality.

In China, the idea that modernisation does not mean "Westernisation" long predates the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). "Chinese substance, Western application" (中体西用) was the slogan of reform-minded intellectuals after the defeat in the Opium Wars. Its essence has been carried on by the CCP whose leaders have emphasised that China will not pursue a "Western-style" but a "Chinese-style modernisation" (中国式现代化). One that modernises industry, agriculture, army and science and technology – but does not include political liberalisation or democracy. The latter, the CCP believes, has led to social conflict within Western societies – something that China can only avoid through the leadership of the CCP and socialist modernisation (社会主义现代化).[1]

Analysis

Li Shulei, the head of the CCP's Propaganda Department, described modernisation as something imposed on China by the West that subsequently became an internal necessity.[2] This view is deeply embedded in China's historical memory. Ever since the defeat by the technologically superior British and Japanese in the 19th century, techno-centred modernisation was seen as the path for China to overcome backwardness and national humiliation. Modernisation was also closely linked to anti-imperialism through the struggle for national self-determination.

Sun Yat-sen, considered the "father of modern China" argued in Three Principles of the People (1911) that increasing "people's welfare" (民生) through economic and industrial development programmes was a prerequisite for realising "nationalism" (民族主义) and "self-determination" (自决权).[3] To this day, both the CCP and the Guomindang (KMT, now one of the political parties in Taiwan) claim Sun Yat-sen's intellectual legacy. In Sun's footsteps, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, who co-founded the CCP in 1921, saw modernisation as a core part of anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle, and as a means to improve people's livelihood and enhance capacities for independent development.

Moreover, the early communists linked China's modernisation quest with those of other poor countries: the future President of the PRC Liu Shaoqi declared in 1945 that the course taken by China would lead the way for Southeast Asian countries facing similar conditions.[4] Later, through foreign aid, China's domestic quest for modernisation was extended to other countries.

Beginning with Mao Zedong, CCP leaders made clear that China would pursue a "socialist modernisation". In the Mao era, it meant following the example of the Soviet Union to modernise industry, agriculture, military and science and technology. The "Great Leap Forward" was Mao's attempt to accelerate the transformation of China's economy from agrarian to industrial – but instead resulted in the largest famine in human history.

The "Four Modernisations" in industry, agriculture, military and science and technology then became the core of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy. To the West, Deng argued: "Our four modernisations are four Chinese-style modernisations".[5] Deng's modernisations included the "socialist market economy" with a mix of state elements and private enterprises, experimentation with foreign technology and policy. But Deng rejected the "Fifth Modernisation", brought forth in the Democracy Wall Movement by Wei Jingsheng: democracy in the liberal sense.

Xi Jinping has described Chinese-style modernisation as the pathway to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which China aims to achieve by the 100th anniversary of the PRC in 2049.[6] A defined milestone on this path is to make progress towards "common prosperity" and to become a middle-income country by 2035. In 2022, the goal of "Chinese-style modernisation" was amended to the Party *Constitution* at the 20th National People's Congress.

The Party discourse on modernisation in the Xi-era has a deep moral undertone. It postulates that in contrast to the "old path of

capital-centred, polarising and expansionist Western modernisation", China was pursuing a better "people-centred development": one to which China's "whole process democracy" was better suited than liberal democracy.[7] Referring to Sun Yat-sen's vision of modernisation in 2020, Xi argued that China has progressed far beyond than what Sun had imagined – and only the CCP was able to achieve that.[8] Liberal voices warn however, that the primacy of ideology over economics in Xi's Chinese-style modernisation has closed the spaces for political innovation that made China's modernisation successful in the first place.[9]

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Multilateralism 【多边主义】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

In the UN context, "multilateralism" is commonly defined as coordinated diplomatic interaction by three or more states (or other actors) carried out within the framework of international organisations and in accordance with their rules. Often, "multilateralism" is used as a synonym for "multilateral system", mainly referencing the system that evolved after World War II consisting of organisations like the UN, NATO, WB, IMF, and EU. As such, "multilateralism" is the source of rules and standards for international cooperation (such as the SDG Agenda 2030 and the Paris Climate Agreement), while "multilateral system" in essence describes the liberal world order.

The Chinese government, in particular in its English-language communications, frequently highlights China's commitment to "multilateralism", citing the BRI as an example and stating that "more than 160 countries and international organisations have signed BRI cooperation documents with China".[1] Internally, however, China's leaders describe the existing rule-based multilateral system as not "fair and just", but as "safeguarding the narrow interests of a group".[2] The BRI, in turn, is presented as an alternative, "joint consultation"-based "Multilateralism with Chinese Characteristics", where interaction with other countries is based not on universally binding rules for international cooperation but on bilateral agreements. China's vision of multilateralism is hence rather a "multi-bilateralism".

Analysis

After assuming power in 2013, Xi Jinping initiated a foreign-policy shift to a more proactive "major power diplomacy", of which the BRI is the most visible manifestation. Originally aimed at increasing cooperation with neighbouring countries, the scope was quickly expanded to become a globally oriented initiative. In English-language communication, the Chinese leadership and CCP outlets frequently highlight that China is a "champion of multilateralism", that China will "adhere to multilateralism" or that China is committed to "upholding

multilateralism". For Xi Jinping, the objective of multilateralism is to construct a "community of a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体). Accordingly, multilateralism "should not take the old road of safeguarding the narrow interests of a group".[3] Its underlying statement is that "international rules should be written by all countries together", implying that the present multilateral system is unjust and that its rules need to be re-written. The Chinese state media have dubbed this approach "Xiplomacy" (习式外交).

In October 2019, an article entitled "Using Xi Jinping Thought as guidance to promote multilateralism with Chinese characteristics" which was written by the MFA Policy Planning Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appeared in the CCP journal *Xuexi Shibao (Study Times)*. It argued that "international affairs should be handled by all countries through consultation, in accordance with rules agreed by all countries, and taking into account the legitimate interests and legitimate concerns of all countries".[4] In addition, the MFA traced the roots of China's approach to multilateralism back to China's antiquity: "In ancient China, there existed the Kuqiu League and the Zhangye League, which reflected the traditional political culture of seeking common ground while maintaining differences, respecting treaties and keeping promises, and cooperation through consultation".

In his report to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping described his vision of multilateralism as "dialogue without confrontation, partnership without alliance" (对话而不对抗、结伴而不结盟), indicating that China opposes universally binding rules for international cooperation, but will interact with other countries through bilateral consultations.[5] A recent example is the G20's attempt to agree on a multilateral solution for debt relief for Covid-19 affected countries in Africa. China stated that it supports multilateral decisions to help low-income countries respond appropriately to debt risk issues and is ready to maintain communication with the affected countries through *bilateral* channels.[6]

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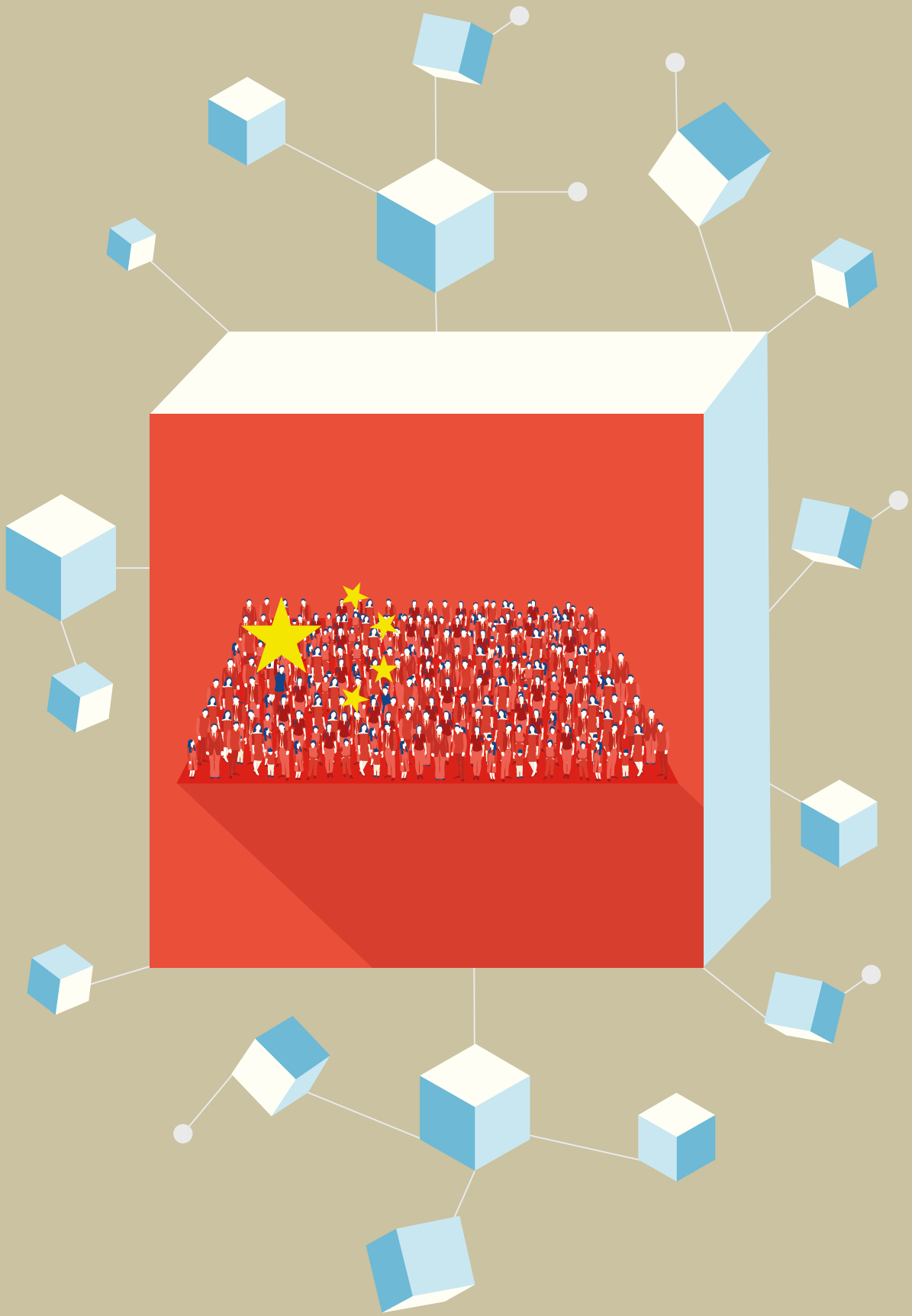

Nation
【国家】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

"Nation" tends to be understood as a community of people living in a particular area or a country, characterised by having its own government, language, history, and traditions.

The Chinese language makes no distinction between nation, country and state using them interchangeably to translate the word *guojia* (国家). In its narrow sense, the term "Chinese nation" refers either to the People's Republic of China (PRC) founded in 1949, or to the historical empires which controlled various parts of the territory that is today governed or claimed by the current Chinese regime. In its broad sense, it embodies the notion of a Chinese super-ethnicity, *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) – which is the Party State's shorthand for all PRC nationals plus the Chinese diaspora.[1]

The Chinese terms used to translate "nation" are linked to notions of ethnicity and civilisation. As the official narrative equates the Chinese nation with the Chinese Communist Party-led state, Chinese patriotism – loving your nation (爱国) – involves loving the Communist Party and being loyal to the party-controlled state.[2]

Analysis

The boundaries of the modern nation-state are set by citizenship. In China's official and popular discourse, however, the extent to which an individual is seen as belonging to the Chinese nation is first and foremost decided by a person's ethnicity. All individuals with some Han Chinese heritage, including both PRC citizens and foreign nationals, are perceived by the state as being part of the Chinese nation.[3] This notion has potential implications for all persons with Chinese ancestry, including a diaspora of as many as 60 million people.[4]

The Chinese state divides the diaspora of the "Chinese nation" into three main groups: PRC nationals who reside abroad, *huaqiao* (华侨), "Chinese" naturalised abroad, *huaren* (华人), and those of Chinese

ancestry born overseas, *huayi* (华裔).[5] The three groups only include overseas Han, while a fourth group, *shaoshu minzu huaqiao huaren* (少数民族华侨华人), or ethnic minority overseas Chinese, has been suggested to categorise non-Han with roots from PRC territory.

The Chinese leadership expects "the sons and daughters of China", including "overseas Chinese compatriots",[6] to contribute to the safeguarding of national interests such as the realisation of the "Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦). The slogan, which was officially launched by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2012, is a euphemism for strengthening the Chinese Party State.

An official narrative suggests that the Chinese nation is the world's only "civilisational state"[7] (文明型国家), meaning that it is unique in terms of ancient history, territorial vastness and technological development, and where the (Han-)Chinese population are indigenous to the territory. [8] By Beijing's own accounts, the Chinese nation is based on a civilisation dating back some five thousand years.[9] In order to be able to promote its version of Chinese history, the PRC government has embarked on a project in which science is tasked with backing up this claim.[10]

From the Chinese regime's perspective, the Chinese nation that it claims to represent not only encompasses citizens of other states and the history of ancient empires. The notion of "national sovereignty and territorial integrity" (国家主权和领土完整) also includes territories outside of the Communist Party's control, such as Taiwan. Before the founding of the PRC, however, the Communist movement explicitly excluded Taiwan from China's territory.[11] This was also the case in the Nationalist government's *Constitution* of 1912.[12]

The official name of the Chinese nation is China (中国, *Zhongguo*) or the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国). When Taiwanese refer to "China" (*Zhongguo*), it is normally with the connotation that it is a country separate from Taiwan. When China is referred to as the mainland (大陆) or inland (内地), the implicit meaning is that China and Taiwan form part of the same nation.

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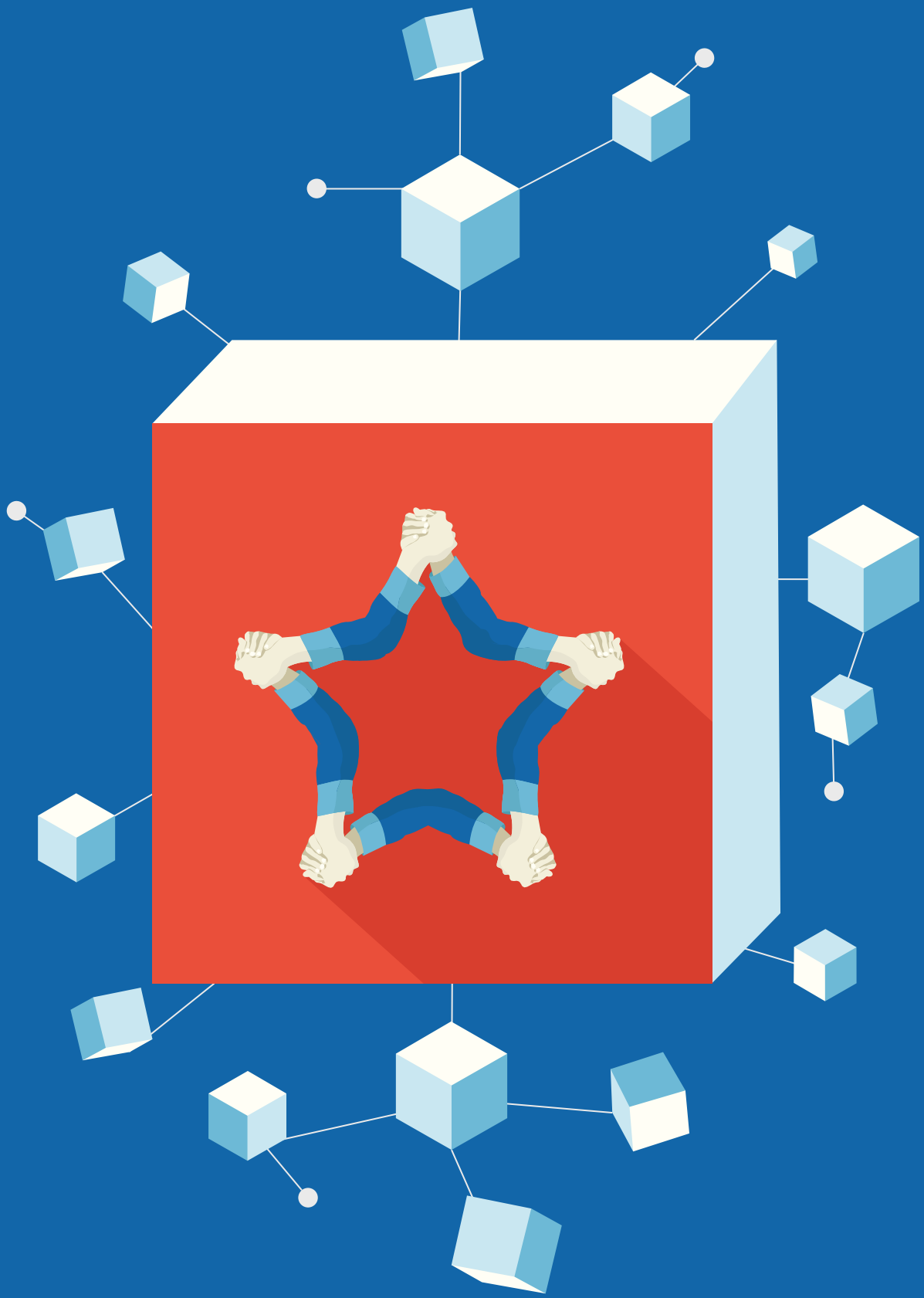

Partnership
【伙伴关系】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

The UN defines partnership as an ongoing collaborative relationship based on alignment of interests around a common vision. It is aimed at combining complementary resources and competencies as well as sharing risks, in order to maximise value creation and deliver benefits to all parties involved.[1] The concept differs from alliances, which are formal agreements with binding commitments, such as NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause.

The Chinese official discourse emphasises that "China does not have allies, but has friends with partnership diplomacy".[2] It argues that while alliances are grounded in the "old thinking of confrontation and bloc mentality," China's partnerships are rooted in mutual benefit, non-alignment, and the principle of "seeking common ground while maintaining differences". Under Xi Jinping, constructing a global network of partnerships that promotes cooperation over confrontation has been framed as key to safeguarding China's development and geopolitical space. China has built a layered system of over one hundred bilateral partnerships, ranging from "strategic" to "all-weather" or "comprehensive", which vary in formality and depth. Though framed as flexible and non-aligned, these partnerships increasingly serve geopolitical functions.

Analysis

In the Mao era, the term partnership carried strongly negative connotations, associated with U.S. foreign policy rhetoric. The *People's Daily* frequently referred to "so-called 'partnerships'" as tools of imperialism, portraying relationships between the U.S. or Western Europe with Asian or African states as exploitative. In contrast, China promoted friendship, non-alignment, and mutually beneficial cooperation.

It was only after the launch of reform and opening in the late 1970s that China began referring to other countries as its partners. At the time, this was almost always used with a qualifier, such as trade

partner, economic partner, or partner for China's modernisation. Brazil became the first country to be named partner without qualifiers in 1985, when Premier Zhao Ziyang, during a visit, proposed that China and Brazil could become "friends and partners". In 1993 Brazil became the first country with which China established a strategic partnership – now regarded in the official discourse as the start of China's partnership diplomacy.[3]

Throughout the 1990s, China established a series of partnerships, including the Strategic Partnership of Coordination and Equality for the 21st Century with Russia in 1996, and in 1997 a Long-term Comprehensive Partnership with France, and an agreement to work toward a "constructive strategic partnership" with the United States.

In official discourse, partnership was positioned as a counter-narrative to alliance (结盟). The concept of Great Power Partnership was presented as a "new type of international relations" between China and major powers of the post-Cold War era like the US, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, or Japan.

The official narrative argues that partnering without alignment (结伴不结盟) is based on the idea that alliances are about finding enemies, while partnerships are about making friends. However, when Xi Jinping introduced the concept of a Global Network of Partnerships in November 2014, he framed it in explicitly strategic terms. Xi called for deeper cooperation and partnerships to help increase China's soft power and safeguard China's development and geopolitical space.[4] Xi's statement has since been linked to the Comprehensive National Security Outlook – China's national security strategy. Partnerships are a tool to counter what China perceives as global US-hegemony.

According to official sources, China has partnerships with nearly 100 countries, structured across more than 20 types and five categories. These range from strategic (战略) partnerships, the most commonly used category, held with at least 80 countries, to all-weather (全天候) or permanent partnerships held with countries such as Pakistan, Venezuela, and Belarus.

Though described as flexible and non-binding, upgrades in partnership status to "comprehensive" or "strategic" often coincide with broader agendas and more formalised mechanisms of cooperation.[5] Despite being framed as "non-aligned" and value-neutral, global partnerships are a tool for promoting the "democratisation of the international relations" (国际关系民主化) and building a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" - a network designed to counter what China perceives as global US-hegemony and advance a more multipolar world order.[6]

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Peace
【和平】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

"The love for peace is in the DNA of the Chinese people", Xi Jinping, General Secretary of China's Communist Party, has repeatedly asserted.[1] This narrative, proclaiming that its subjects are harmonious, non-violent and benevolent by nature, rhymes well with the Party's conviction that it is always morally correct. While the UN Charter does not explicitly define the term "peace", it is generally understood as a state where war, non-state sanctioned hostility and violence are absent. Moreover, the Chinese leadership's notion of peace involves social stability, "harmony", development, cooperation, and mutual benefit – but also the absence of interventionism and colonialism.

Not surprisingly, the CCP's rhetoric often emphasises its own "peaceful" nature. As the Party characterises China as peaceful by definition and the Chinese nationality (or race) as genetically peace-loving, its defence policy is also portrayed as purely defensive in nature. Speaking in Berlin in March 2014, Xi said that the pursuit of peace, amity and harmony was "an integral part of the Chinese character, which runs deep in the blood of the Chinese people", and that it represented "the peace-loving cultural tradition of the Chinese nation over the past several thousand years".[2] In Xi's rhetoric, China's fondness for peace is explained with reference to factors related to Chinese ethnicity, tradition and history.

Analysis

While Mao Zedong came to the same conclusion, his explanation was purely ideological in nature. According to Mao, all socialist countries, including China, want peace; "[t]he only ones who crave war and do not want peace are certain monopoly capitalist groups in a handful of imperialist countries that depend on aggression for their profits".[3]

A government White Paper issued in 2011, "China's Peaceful Development", explains that China's love for peace is based on lessons drawn from history: "From their bitter sufferings from war and poverty in

modern times, the Chinese people have learned the value of peace and the pressing need of development". As a result, China "never engages in aggression or expansion, never seeks hegemony, and remains a staunch force for upholding regional and world peace and stability".[4]

The White Paper stresses the importance of preserving social stability, which is tightly linked to China's notion of peace and one of the CCP's core objectives. In fact, "preserving peace" could also refer to the suppression of peaceful protest movements, let alone violent social unrest. The Chinese regime perceives peace and stability as the bases of its legitimacy, and therefore witnessed the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s with great concern.[5] "Preserving peace" in this context is as much about protecting the regime from its people as it is about protecting the ruling party from real or imagined foreign hostile forces.[6] Such concerns also explain China's investment in technologies of mass surveillance as part of its overall security apparatus.

The 2011 White Paper also explains that the overall goal of China's pursuit of "peaceful development" is to "achieve modernisation and common prosperity". Xi Jinping's "Thought on Diplomacy", published in early 2020, stresses that China "insists on the path of peaceful development based on mutual respect, cooperation, and mutual benefit".[7]

Moreover, the "peaceful unification" ("和平统一") of China is a euphemism for Taiwan's incorporation into the People's Republic by peaceful means. The term implies that unification could also occur by non-peaceful means, i.e., through a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. In fact, China has made it clear that it is ready to go to war if the current status quo, in which Taiwan is a *de facto* (but not *de jure*) independent state, is changed. Through the adoption of the 2005 *Anti-Secession Law*, China clarified that it "shall employ non-peaceful means … to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" should "secessionist forces … cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China" or if "possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted".[8]

Meanwhile, the CCP continues to claim that "peace is in the Chinese DNA", that its defence policy is "defensive in nature", and that it "poses no military threat to any other country". The logic here is that Taiwan is actually not another country from the CCP's perspective: rather, it is portrayed as an integral part of the PRC's territory. Hence the Chinese government's proclaimed adherence to "the principle of not attacking others unless it is attacked" rests on the definition of what constitutes an "attack".[9]

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Prosperity
【富裕】

David Bandurski

Brief

In global discourse, prosperity has typically encompassed economic and social well-being, which in many contexts — both within nation states and international institutions — has been linked to social and political freedoms. The UN Charter speaks of promoting "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".[1]

In the modern era, prosperity has featured prominently within Chinese political traditions. Sun Yat-sen, often seen as the founder of modern China, in 1905 listed "people's livelihood" as one of his three key political goals (along with nationalism and democracy). In subsequent decades, various iterations of prosperity were closely tied to national revival and political legitimacy — from Mao Zedong's "common prosperity" (共同富裕) as radical egalitarianism promoting violent revolutionary struggle, to Deng Xiaoping's reinterpretation to enable grassroots capitalism. In Xi Jinping's China, "common prosperity" has assumed a new populist meaning, with an emphasis on performative acts and propaganda. Unlike global conceptions linking prosperity to individual liberty, China's notion centres on prosperity as a good delivered by the Party.

Analysis

Before the Communist era, Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (三民主义) established prosperity as central to Chinese political thought. The third of these principles, *minsheng* (民生主義), emphasised "people's livelihood" through land reform, wealth redistribution, and state-managed economic development, dividing welfare into four essential areas: clothing, food, housing, and mobility. Influenced by American economic and social philosopher Henry George and combining traditional Chinese values with modern governance concepts, Sun's doctrine sought cooperation between classes rather than Marxist struggle, advocating redistributing land ownership rights and state oversight of major industries as methods to achieve national prosperity without creating extreme wealth inequality.

The phrase "common prosperity" (共同富裕) first appeared in the People's Daily on 25 September 1953. [2] This Maoist conception linked prosperity to collective ownership and mutual aid within agricultural cooperatives. As political struggles subsided in the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping led an ideological reversal. While capitalism had been condemned as "a road of a few getting rich", Deng's reform and opening policy rewrote "common prosperity" to embrace what Mao had forbidden — allowing select individuals and regions to accumulate wealth first. [3] "Poverty is not socialism", Deng wrote.[4]

Deng's capitalism as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" held GDP growth as a key marker through successive administrations. In 1997, Jiang Zemin introduced the "Two Centennial Goals"[5]: by 2021, the CCP's 100-year anniversary, to "enter moderate prosperity, and stride boldly toward prosperity and power"; and by 2049, the national centennial, to "build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious". These became goal posts for "common prosperity".[6]

By the second half of the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012), it was clear that rapid development had brought sharp social and economic inequities. Considering "the intensification of social stratification and the increase in social problems", as one official economic journal wrote in 2007, "there must be new ideas". The rethink took form as Hu Jintao's "Scientific View of Development", which stressed balanced growth over pure economic expansion.

In the Xi era, common prosperity has been hobbled by contractions in China's economic model, chief among them capitalist-style inequalities ("natural antagonism") stemming from the fact that three quarters of urban workers are employed by private enterprises. While the promise of shared prosperity remains central to the CCP's legitimacy, lagging economic growth has necessitated new approaches.

Xi Jinping's response has been a mix of initiatives and performative gestures. In March 2021, Zhejiang province was designated as a "demonstration zone", with proposed measures including the creation of "high-quality" jobs to promote common prosperity. Renewed talk of common prosperity at the top followed in August 2021, as Xi wrapped the concept with the geo-politicised "Chinese-style modernisation" — essentially, the assertion that modernisation as pursued by the CCP is fairer and more sustainable than that of the West.

The performative aspect became evident in August-September 2021, when major firms were pressured to donate billions to common prosperity funds. Similarly, China's December 2020 declaration of victory in the "war against poverty" asserted victory even while Premier

Li Keqiang acknowledged that 600 million Chinese still lived on less than 140 dollars per month.

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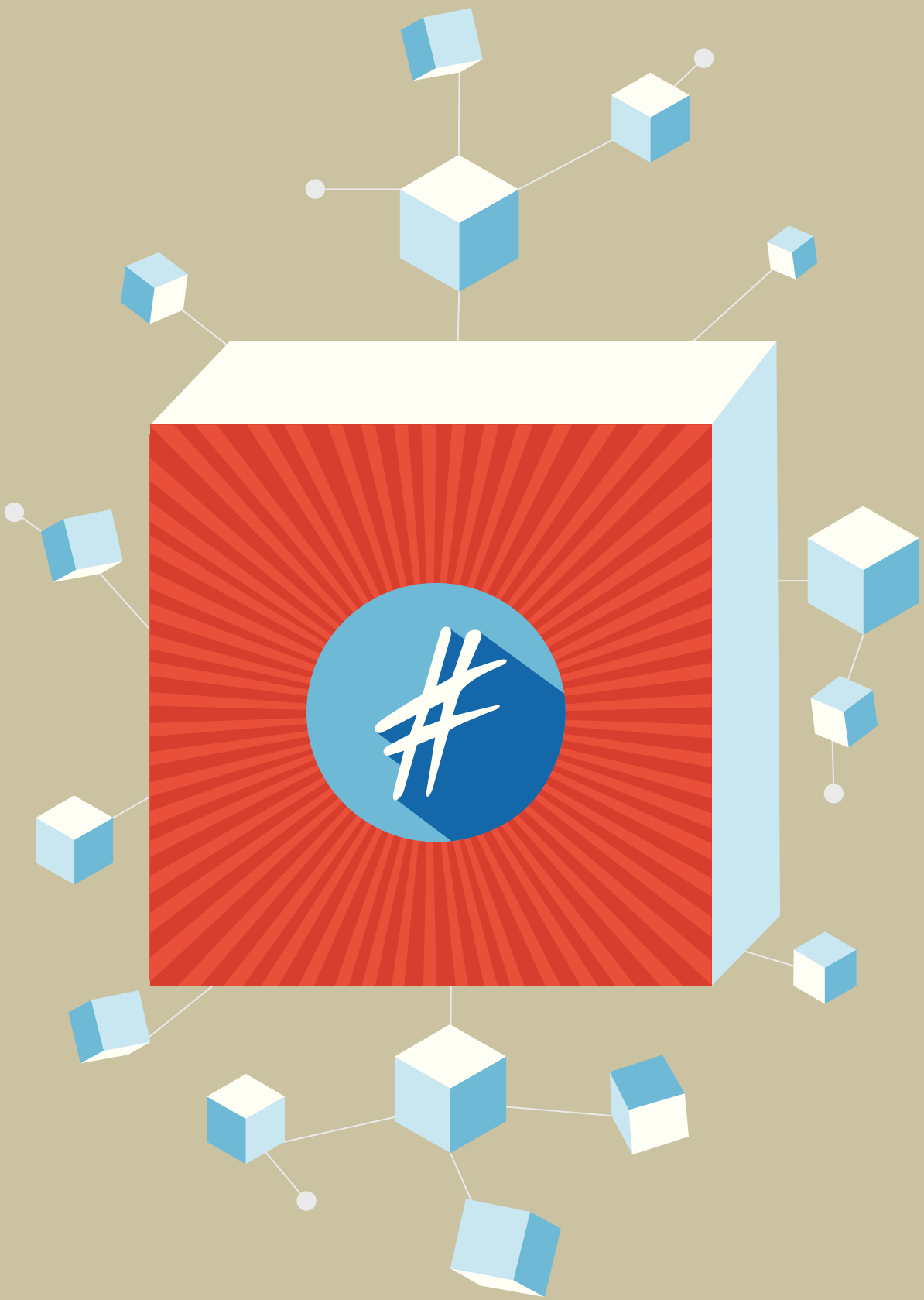

Public Diplomacy 【公共外交】

David Bandurski

Brief

From its modern origins in the 1960s, the notion of "public diplomacy" broadly involves governments cultivating both public opinion in other countries and intercultural communications. The aim was to distinguish government-led international public relations efforts from the distasteful notion of propaganda. More recently, the idea of a "new public diplomacy" has emerged to encompass the activities of non-state actors, including NGOs.

The trend in China in the reform era, and particularly since the 1990s, has likewise been to distance international public relations from so-called "external propaganda", a mainstay of the Chinese Communist Party since the founding of the PRC. Since 2013, however, the re-centralisation of CCP power under Xi Jinping and a renewed emphasis on ideological conformity have reinvigorated the focus on "external propaganda" around the conviction that state media and even quasi-private actors must work internationally to "tell China's story well" (讲好中国故事), thus enhancing the country's "international discourse power" (国际话语权) as a key aspect of its "comprehensive national power" (综合国力).

Analysis

In January 1991, still faced with sanctions from the EU and the United States as a result of its crackdown on pro-democracy protests on 4 June 1989, China established the State Council Information Office, a government office whose function is to "explain China to foreign countries".[1] Chinese experts have regarded this institutional change as marking a move away from the influence of so-called "external propaganda" toward a "concept of modern public diplomacy".[2]

Marking a further attempt to rebrand its information activities, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department – an office in fact overlapping with the Information Office (the former emphasising internal controls, the latter external messaging) – issued a notice stating that the word "propaganda" (宣传) in the department's official English translation would be formally changed to "publicity".[3] The ambiguous dual identity of these two offices at the present day can be seen as symbolising the tension that persists in China between "external propaganda" as a more rigid notion of party-controlled messaging, and the broader notion of "public diplomacy" as the need to engage more flexibly and credibly with foreign publics.

In late 2007, Joseph Nye's term "soft power" was also introduced into China's official political discourse.[4] In 2008, as China prepared to host the Beijing Olympic Games, which were regarded as a historic opportunity to showcase China's development before the world and increase its soft power, the country faced a wave of criticism over its human rights abuses. Accordingly, much of the official CCP discourse focused on rectifying the relative weakness of China's "discourse power" against the "soft containment" of the "biased" media of the West. Hu Jintao spoke of "cultural soft power" and increasing the influence of Chinese traditional culture as a key component of "comprehensive national power", essential to maintaining the CCP's global interests.

Initiated in 2009, China's "going out" strategy involved the investment of billions of dollars every year in the overseas expansion of Chinese media, an effort focused entirely on Party-state media, leaving out more vibrant Chinese commercial media. By 2012, China's domestic media environment and non-governmental exchanges were already coming under much tighter Party control, and centralised CCP coordination remained the model when it came to public diplomacy.

Since 2013, the role of the Party in public diplomacy has become more pronounced than at any time in the reform era. In a speech to the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference on 19 August 2013, Xi Jinping emphasised the old model of "external propaganda" as he outlined his programme for international messaging: "[We] must meticulously and properly conduct external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China's story well, communicating China's voice well".[5]

The core content of "telling China's story well", now the central concept in the CCP's orthodoxy on public diplomacy, centres on the Party's leadership. Within this concept, the chief objective of China's public diplomacy, or external propaganda, conducted through the state

conglomerate China Media Group and other channels, is to "create an international public opinion environment favourable to China's development" under the Party's leadership.

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Reciprocity 【对等】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

Reciprocity is a social norm and a key principle in international relations, diplomacy, trade, and law that can be summarised as responding in kind to actions by others. Its meaning, however, varies greatly depending on the context and can be categorised into two types: positive and negative. Positive reciprocity involves returning favours or beneficial actions, while negative reciprocity involves responding in kind to harm or detrimental actions.[1]

A common connotation of reciprocity is that of reciprocal justice – "an eye for an eye" or "tit for tat". Western calls for reciprocity, often in relation to China, typically focus on achieving balanced and fair trade that adheres to international agreements, highlighting the notion of a "level playing field".[2] In contrast, Chinese rhetoric on reciprocity emphasises mutual benefit and 'win-win' outcomes (互惠互利), terms commonly found in Chinese official documents and statements.

The Chinese leadership maintains that reciprocity should be "conditionalised", taking disparities in economic development into account, as measured, for example, by GDP per capita.[3] This means that China, in light of the country's official status as a developing economy, should not be held to the same standards as developed economies.

Analysis

The concept of reciprocity is found in both western and Chinese ethical systems. In the West, it stems from the Christian instruction to treat others as you would want them to treat you. A negative variation ("do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you") is attributed to Confucius in the Analects.

In modern-day Chinese official discourse, reciprocity is often intertwined with notions of mutual respect, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation. Officials try to emphasise a collaborative and less confrontational approach to international relations by contrasting

reciprocity with undesirable ideas of zero-sum thinking and a "cold war mentality". Reciprocity, in this sense, is a cornerstone of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (1954), adopted in the 1960s by the Non-Aligned Movement. These principles underscore mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence, reflecting a vision where global cooperation trumps unilateral gain.[4]

When engaging with partners in the Global South, China often emphasises reciprocity as part of a narrative of mutual respect and common development. China portrays itself as an altruistic provider of global public goods, contrasting this with the perceived selfish interests of Western powers.[5] This narrative is reinforced by China's diplomatic efforts, which highlight positive reciprocity, such as infrastructure investments in exchange for natural resources, or mutual support for domestic political issues. In developing economies that the Party-state considers friendly, it mostly refrains from retaliatory measures, prioritising potential geopolitical wins over economic interests.[6]

Conversely, China's relationship with liberal democracies, particularly the United States and the European Union, is often characterised by negative connotations of reciprocity. Beijing frequently criticises Western pressure on China to open its economy, arguing that stronger Western powers demand reciprocal actions from less developed economies without offering equivalent concessions.

In the context of trade relations, reciprocity is a contentious issue between China and the European Union. The EU advocates for strict reciprocity in market access and regulatory treatment, but China maintains that its status as a developing economy should be considered, arguing for conditional reciprocity. This fundamental disconnect was highlighted in 2019 when the European Commission ceased to consider China a developing country, denying Beijing's requests for special treatment.[7]

Regarding climate change, China also invokes a form of reciprocity that it calls "common but differentiated responsibilities". This is a form of reciprocity where developed countries are expected to take the lead in reducing emissions, due to their historical contributions to the problem.

Reciprocity also plays a role in retaliatory measures. China explicitly invokes the principle of reciprocity when responding to actions perceived as hostile, such as the closure of diplomatic missions or the imposition of sanctions. However, China often does not acknowledge the reciprocal nature of its actions in diplomacy or trade, whether

it involves detaining foreign nationals or imposing restrictions on foreign goods.

The term "win-win" is a prominent feature of Chinese diplomatic language, emphasising the avoidance of sensitive issues in bilateral interactions through "seeking common ground while putting aside differences". This approach is contrasted with the European perspective, where reciprocity is less about avoiding controversy and more about achieving balanced cooperation.

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Responsible Research
【负责任研究】

Marina Rudyak

Brief

The 2018 UNESCO *Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers* defines responsible research as a practice that upholds ethical, social, ecological, and scientific responsibility. It calls on researchers to minimise harm to human subjects and the environment, manage resources sustainably, and ensure informed consent and appropriate crediting of contributions. The document also emphasises the importance of academic freedom, open access to knowledge, and the protection of human rights as integral to responsible scientific conduct. Some countries have also discussed responsible research in terms of economic security, including the United States and Germany.

China actively participates in international debates on responsible research, for example through the 2023 *Guidelines for Responsible Research Conduct*[1] issued by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). However, its domestic discourse emphasises a distinct understanding. Responsible research in the Chinese context is closely tied to the notions of "research integrity" (科研诚信) and the fight against "research misconduct" (科研不端行为), with strong emphasis placed on disciplinary mechanisms and moral conduct. At the same time, responsibility is also framed in terms of scientists' contribution to national development, modernisation, and technological self-reliance – positioning researchers as agents of state-led progress.

Analysis

The Chinese debate on responsible research emerged in the early 1990s in response to a series of plagiarism scandals. This led state-affiliated research institutions to issue codes of conduct, framing "scientific ethics" (科学道德) as key for both national progress and security. The Chinese Academy of Sciences' (CAS) 2001 *Code of Scientific Ethics*, for

instance, emphasised researchers' obligation to support technological progress and safeguard national, information, ecological, environmental, and health security—with national security listed first. MOST's 2006 *Measures for Handling Scientific Research Misconduct* framed research integrity as essential to achieving China's strategic goals of independent innovation, economic and social development, national defence capabilities, and China's rise as a global science and technology power.

From the early 2010s, the term "responsible science and research" (负责任(的)科学研究), along with variations of "responsible research and innovation" (负责任的研究与创新), began to enter the Chinese discourse, partly inspired by the European Union's Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) policy.[2] *The National Science and Technology Plan of the 13th Five-Year-Plan* (2016-2020) marked the first official mention, framing "responsible research and innovation" as a key to the "construction of socialist culture". Although the Plan advocated critical thinking and academic debate and freedom, it also emphasised researchers' duties: social responsibility (社会责任), serving the motherland (报效祖国) and embodying core socialist values and good morals.

This framing was reinforced at the 2016 National Conference on Science and Technology Innovation, where Xi Jinping emphasised that researchers should not only pursue knowledge, but apply scientific and technological achievements to solve problems and realise the great cause of modernisation – "write your papers on the motherland!"[3] The slogan has since been frequently repeated by Xi Jinping and widely cited in official and academic discourse.

Between 2018 and 2023, the CCP issued guidance further institutionalising this understanding. This includes: *Scientific Research Integrity* (2018)[4], focusing on preventing fraud; on the Spirit of Scientists (2019)[5], promoting patriotic research ethics; and, on the *Governance of Science and Technology Ethics* (2023)[6], which introduced new review mechanisms in sensitive fields like artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology.

The Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the official discourse on state-led "responsible innovation", with calls for policy-makers to define research priorities. Innovation, the argument goes, should be planned – not be left to the market or individual researchers – because it must serve public rather than individual interest. In the context of COVID-19, this meant that research was not primarily about understanding the virus, but about serving the people and advancing national goals.

While MOST's 2023 new *Guidelines for Responsible Research Conduct* draw on international practices and devoting an extensive part

to regulating AI, they require institutional approval before publishing major breakthroughs and extend research oversight to enterprises. The guidelines have been updated several times but the initial message that responsible research serves self-reliance and China's rise as global science superpower, prioritising national goals over academic freedom.

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Right to Privacy
【隐私权】

Katja Drinhausen

Brief

At its core, the right to privacy refers to freedom from undue interference in personal life, home and correspondence.[1] UN and EU standards make clear that the right to privacy entails freedom from arbitrary and mass surveillance.[2] Safeguarding privacy has become a challenging issue in the digital age, as both states and corporations collect and analyse significant amounts of data. Privacy is therefore closely intertwined with the protection of personal data, for which e.g., GDPR, and national laws create new frameworks.

Articles 39 and 40 of the PRC *Constitution* similarly forbid the unlawful search and intrusion of the homes and correspondence of Chinese citizens.[3] China's legal protection of personal data has been substantially expanded in recent years. Where discourse and legislation in liberal democracies has traditionally emphasised protection from the state, the focus in China is predominantly on protecting citizens from excessive collection and abuse of data by corporate actors. The state retains expansive rights to monitor and request data about its citizens under broadly defined public and national security prerogatives.

Analysis

China's new *Civil Code* (2021) and *Personal Information Protection Law* (2021) have strengthened the protection of personal rights and information in China.[4] Companies or organisations that handle personal information now face stricter obligations to gain consent and inform individuals about the data they collect and how it may be processed.

Although privacy and security of personal data were highlighted in the 2021 *White Paper on Human Rights Progress* by the State Council,[5] the acknowledgement of a right to privacy as a distinct individual

right is largely absent from official documents. This has both political and linguistic roots. Under Mao's collectivist regime, keeping things private was a matter of suspicion. The wider adoption of the term was also hampered by the fact that the Chinese term for privacy (隐私) is homonymous with the term for "shameful secret" (阴私).

The political and public approach changed in the era of reform and opening. In the 1990s and early 2000s, China's government formulated the first data protection regulations. The following decades saw not only a growing protection of privacy rights through personal information and data security standards, but also an increasing use of the term in academic writing and public debates.

Today, privacy is a well-established term in China. This is closely linked to the widespread adaptation of digital technologies in daily life – from communication and travel to consumption and payment. In contrast to European norms, Chinese policy documents and legislation frame privacy and the protection of personal information primarily under information security and consumer rights and are largely directed at the private sector, not protection from state-led efforts to surveil the population.

State organs must comply with established standards in their collection and use of data. But *China's National Security Law, Cybersecurity Law* and other legislation give the state wide remit to monitor public and online spaces.[6] Corporate privacy statements generally include references that data can be shared with relevant agencies where it concerns public and national security.[7] As platforms are legally required to provide online services only after real-name registration and identity verification, data can quickly be tied to individuals.

To build a peaceful China (平安中国), government policies since 2012 aim at expanding camera coverage, tracking physical movements and monitoring online expression to build a preventive, "multi-dimensional" system for safeguarding public security (立体化信息化社会治安防控体系) – and the political security of the Party State.[8] Complementing previous surveillance initiatives that are now a core component of "smart" and "safe cities", recent years have also seen a digital upgrading of mechanisms already established under Mao. This includes digitisation of personal files on citizens as well as the use of apps and hotlines to encourage mutual monitoring and reporting among the population. Progress in surveillance capacities has been on display in pandemic management, but also in minority areas such as Xinjiang.[9]

Government efforts to use data for public and national security purposes are by no means exclusive to China. What sets the implementation of privacy in the PRC apart is the lack of institutional and public

oversight through administrative and constitutional review procedures, a free press and civil rights organisations. This approach to privacy is not uncontested. From public and academic discussions to individual lawsuits and refusal of companies to hand-over data – China's citizens are concerned about the protection of their privacy. Leaks of public databases and the abuse of China's health code apps to prevent protests sparked renewed debates in 2022.[10]

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Rule of Law 【法治】

Malin Oud

Brief

The principle of the rule of law means that laws provide meaningful restraints on state power. The United Nations defines the rule of law as "a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards".[1] In a rule of law system, every person is subject to the law and no one is above it. In liberal democracies, the rule of law is associated with civil and political rights and implies a separation of powers.

The Chinese Communist Party's conception of the rule of law – *fazhi* (法治) or *yifazhiguo* (依法治国), which literally means "law-based governance" or ruling the country in accordance with the law – has very little in common with the liberal democratic concept. In China's "socialist rule of law system with Chinese characteristics" the legal system is under the Party's leadership and supervision. The CCP ultimately sees the law as a tool to ensure stability and order, as well as being a means to justify and maintain Party rule. Arguably, *fazhi* is so different from the international principle of rule of law that it should perhaps not be translated as "rule of law".

Analysis

The rule of law has been a recurring theme in China's reform plans and official discourse ever since the early 1980s. The reconstruction of the legal system and the professionalisation of the judiciary were important aspects of China's modernisation reforms in the aftermath of the political campaigns of Mao Zedong, which culminated in the Cultural Revolution.

After Mao's death, measures were put in place to prevent the over-concentration of power and to delegate authority from the Communist Party to government agencies. Key words like class struggle,

contradictions and revolution were replaced with stability, harmony and the rule of law. Legal institutions were created, entire new areas of legislation drafted, law schools established. As the country opened itself up to foreign investment and international cooperation, there was an assumption in the West that China would also be socialised into accepting international norms and that it was evolving from 'rule by man' under Mao Zedong to the rule of law in a liberal democratic sense.

Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of the rule of law since he rose to power in 2012 and pledged to catch both "tigers and flies" in a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign. The Fourth Plenum of the 18th Congress of the CCP in 2014 had the rule of law as its overall theme, which it declared would provide "a powerful guarantee for achieving the Two Centenary Goals and realising the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".[2]

However, if the first thirty years of legal reform and opening up saw the de-politicisation of the Chinese justice system, the last decade has seen its re-politicisation or *partyfication*. Party organs have absorbed their government counterparts, and the law has been used to codify the Party's leadership. In 2018, a constitutional amendment removed the term limits for the presidency introduced in 1982. A series of vague but sweeping security laws and regulations have been enacted, including most recently in Hong Kong. Illustrative of China's instrumental use of law and selective compliance with international law, in June 2020 Beijing passed the *Hong Kong National Security Law*, bypassing Hong Kong's local legislature and the "One Country Two Systems'" principle of the *Sino-British Joint Declaration*.

In November 2020, the CCP held a conference declaring the establishment of "Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law and its status as the guiding thought for law-based governance in China".[3] Stressing the importance of upholding the leadership of the CCP in order to build China into a socialist country under the rule of law by the year 2035, the whole country was instructed to seriously study and understand Xi Jinping's Thought on the Rule of Law (习近平法治思想) as "one of the pivotal pillars of the ideological complex that supports the country in the years to come".[4]

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Science
【科学】

David Bandurski

Brief

While international definitions of science centre on the study of the physical world through unbiased observations and verifiable experimentation, the word "science" has complex, multi-layered meanings within the context of Chinese Communist Party discourse. On the one hand, science as a discipline systematically studying the natural world has been regarded as a crucial contributor to national development, driving economic growth and self-reliance.

On the other hand, notions of science have been interwoven with political claims to truth as a source of political power. From the time of Mao, with inspiration from the Soviet Union, politics and science have been bedfellows. This can be seen today as calls for "speaking politics" sometimes override scientific recommendations, as in the early days of the Wuhan outbreak, and as political education emphasising the Party's legacy is incorporated into science education materials. References to actions or policies as "scientific" are today sprinkled throughout CCP discourse – a claim to the fundamental rightness and rationality of all the Party does.

Analysis

The fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 ushered in a wave of soul-searching about China's future. Writing in *New Youth* magazine in January 1919, Chen Duxiu, one of the early founders of the CCP, personified China's hopes for restoration in "Mr Democracy" and "Mr Science".[1] Only these "two gentlemen", he wrote, could "remedy all of the darkness that has shrouded China – in politics, in morals, in academic endeavours and ideas", and free the country from external aggression and colonial occupation. Embracing the natural sciences meant abandoning the old superstitions and embarking on a project of national strengthening.[2]

With the founding of the CCP in 1921, Party leaders were keen to lay claim to science and modernity. Taking their cues from Soviet writings, CCP theorists saw the introduction to China of the materialist

philosophy of Marxism as a moment of "scientific" reckoning in which "Chinese Communists began to have a more scientific understanding of many basic issues of the Chinese revolution and society".[3] In the 1950s, CCP discourse made clear that the scientist's primary role was to "serve the people", and to be on guard against the people's enemies.

At the outset of the economic reform and opening period in the 1980s, there was a new emphasis on science development. China's focus was on acquiring foreign technologies, with the pace of technology imports increasing dramatically.[4] Chinese overseas study also helped to build China's science system from the 1980s. These developments soared in the 1990s, the natural sciences viewed as crucial to overall economic development and national prestige.[5] Nevertheless, the notion of the "scientific spirit" as a trait of the CCP's Marxist politics persisted alongside real advancements in science, marking the Party's claim to practical and people-based policy responses. One of the most prominent examples in the reform era was the "scientific view of development" (科学发展观), a catchphrase introduced in the early 2000s by President Hu Jintao that essentially outlined the need for more balanced development.

In the Xi Jinping era, China's advancements as a "scientific power" have continued apace.[6] China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) places science and technology at the centre of national priorities, with Xi pledging to make China the "world's primary centre" for science and innovation.[7] But the conflation of the scientific and the political has also continued apace. In late 2019, as the earliest cases of Covid-19 appeared in the city of Wuhan, local doctors were disciplined for raising the alarm through private chat groups, and told that they must "speak politics, speak discipline and speak science".[8] Medical personnel were obliged, on political grounds, not to share information publicly, effectively delaying by many weeks a more concerted domestic and global response. Early in the pandemic, China has also placed limits on the publication of research on the origins of the novel coronavirus, prioritising politics over science.[9]

The phrase "speaking politics" has surged under Xi, underscoring the need for obedience to the Party and its prerogatives. In recent years, there has also been a growing emphasis in science education on the need to simultaneously carry out ideological and political indoctrination of China's youth. One recent textbook on biology, for example, instructs teachers to implant a discussion of "red genes" – a reference to the political and historical legacy of the CCP – into a unit on genetics.[10]

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Security
【安全】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

For China, *national* security and state security are synonyms (both are translated as 国家安全), meaning that the two English terms can be used interchangeably. State security refers to the consolidation of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling position and to its protection from domestic and foreign threats. As such, threats to state security are perceived by the Party as existential in nature. State security covers political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social stability, and information security, meaning that these can be understood as conditions for the regime's continued monopoly on power.

In order to fully grasp the Party's notion of state security, it is relevant to understand the perceived threats to it, which are also threats to Party rule. An overarching threat, in the Party's mind, is the ideological infiltration of "Western hostile forces", including foreign NGOs and international media. Rhetorically speaking, an individual's personal security will not be safeguarded if the regime is not secure. Meanwhile, there is an underlying assumption in China that those who act in line with the interests of the ruling class should enjoy safety.

Analysis

China's emphasis on the Party-state as the key beneficiary of state security, rather than highlighting, for example, social and individual freedoms, is reflected in Article 2 of the *National Security Law* (NSL) of 2015:

> State security refers to the relative absence of international or domestic *threats to the state's power to govern*, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security [emphasis added].[1]

The NSL furthermore defines "the state" as ruled by the CCP: "[t]he State persists in the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party".[2] Similar language can be found in China's *Constitution*. Hence, "state security" should ultimately be understood as security for the Party.

The primary missions of China's civilian intelligence service, the Ministry for State Security (MSS), further reflect the Chinese concept of state security. In contrast to its equivalents in democracies, the MSS, for example, conducts domestic espionage on dissidents with foreign connections, and overseas espionage on Uyghurs, Tibetans, Taiwanese, democracy activists, and members of the Falun Gong movement, as well as their supporters. This reflects concerns within the Party that these groups could become security threats, including any advocacy against Beijing which could negatively affect China's international image.

An example of how the concept of 'security' is used by Chinese officials is Beijing's efforts to defend the establishment of re-education camps in Xinjiang from 2017. While detainees have not been charged with any crimes, the Chinese government has depicted the camps as part of its counter-terrorism efforts, thereby safeguarding state security.

Cultural security is aimed at protecting Chinese society from cultural infiltration by hegemonic powers, Westernisation and cultural decay.[3] The concept of cultural security is intertwined with "ideological security", which involves threats including "Western-style democracy, Western cultural hegemony, the diversified dissemination of internet information and public opinion, and religious infiltration". In 1994 Wang Huning, a current member of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee and a prominent ideologue, asserted that globalisation should be understood as Western cultural hegemony, which constituted an existential threat to the Party.

Food security is defined as national food self-sufficiency and is also aligned with regime security.[4] This can be compared to the definition of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, where food security is "a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".[5]

Human security is understood in China as focused on the collective humankind, rather than emphasising security for individuals, which is normally at the heart of human security discourses. In the Chinese conception, the state is seen as the key guarantor of human security, rather than as a threat to it.[6]

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Sovereignty
【主权】

Jerker Hellström

Brief

The concept of state sovereignty can be defined as the exclusive right of states to govern within their own territory. In China, sovereignty should be understood as absolute and perpetual state power, where the state is governed by the Chinese Communist Party. Moreover, it is intimately linked to China's emphasis on mutual non-interference in domestic affairs, as outlined in the (1954) Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.[1] China is a principled defender of a strong normative understanding of sovereignty and includes state sovereignty as one of its non-negotiable "national core interests", of which the overarching interest is the Communist Party's continued monopoly on power.

From the Communist Party's perspective, sovereignty includes the exclusive right of the government of a sovereign nation to exercise control over issues within its own borders, including, for example, its political, economic, cultural, and technological activities. The CCP includes the territory within China's *de jure* borders, as well as its territorial claims, in its concept of state sovereignty. As such, Taiwan and land formations in the South China Sea, for example, set the outer geographical boundaries of its claims to state sovereignty.

Analysis

China bases its concept of state sovereignty on selective historical territorial claims. For example, the CCP claims to have sovereignty over Taiwan dating back to the Qing empire (1644-1911). While it does not claim parts of present-day Mongolia, which were once ruled by the Yuan empire (1271-1368) (and later the Qing empire), Beijing argues that parts of the South China Sea were under Chinese jurisdiction during the same period and should therefore be recognised as its sovereign territory. Despite a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 finding that China's "historical" claims in the South China Sea have no legal basis, Beijing continues to maintain this position.

In 2009 China apparently won support from the United States for its sovereignty and territorial claims when a joint statement issued by the Obama-Hu Jintao summit included language suggesting that the parties have agreed to respect one another's "core interests".[2] As China's core interests include its sovereignty over Taiwan, the statement could be interpreted as a recognition that Taiwan is a part of China, which would have been a major shift in America's China policy. The term "core interests" did not appear in the joint statement for the second Hu-Obama summit.[3]

China's adherence to Westphalian norms of sovereignty is another strong influence over its posture in the international human rights debate. China insists that a country's level of development, culture and values has to be taken into account, which places strict limits on international human rights monitoring and enforcement. China tends to regard humanitarian intervention with great suspicion, arguing that it could serve as a pretext for Western countries to interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, thereby threatening their sovereignty.[4]

Cyber sovereignty should be understood as referring to China's efforts to control the flow of information available to internet users in China in order to ensure social stability and regime legitimacy, while playing a leading role in the global governance of cyberspace. As such, "cyber sovereignty" constitutes a pushback against ideas that cyberspace should be a free, open and global platform governed primarily by a bottom-up approach.

Cultural sovereignty can be defined as the state's right to promote its cultural interests independently, i.e., without external interference. The CCP claims jurisdiction over issues relating to Chinese culture in other countries, when official narratives are challenged. In October 2020, for example, the Chinese authorities attempted to censor an exhibition on Genghis Khan at a Museum in Nantes, France. According to the museum, Chinese officials wanted to rewrite the history of Mongolia.[5]

Religious sovereignty is rarely invoked in Chinese discourse, but the fact that the Chinese Communist Party asserts sovereignty over religious affairs outside its borders makes it worth mentioning here. For example, Beijing claims to be the highest authority in Tibetan Buddhism, despite the Party's secular nature. While the 14th Dalai Lama, the highest spiritual authority in Tibetan Buddhism, resides in India, the CCP insists that it has the sovereign right to identify and appoint the next Dalai Lama.[6]

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Stability
【稳定】

David Bandurski

Brief

In the 1945 UN Charter, "stability" was regarded as a basic prerequisite for "peaceful and friendly relations among nations".[1] In international relations, stability is defined as a condition where interstate violence is unexpected and rare. More recently, the concept has figured strongly in UN discussions of development, stressing stable and peaceful societies that protect individual rights regardless of ethnicity or faith. As the UN secretary-general told a gathering in 2014: "Children need to be safe going to school. Women need to be free of violence at home and workplaces."[2]

While China actively engages with UN discourse on stability, the CCP has understood the concept — even as it relates to development — in more politically laden terms, with three basic strains. First, stability has been inseparable from the CCP's efforts to manage internal divisions and power struggles. Second, it assumes the inviolable legitimacy of the CCP and its governance model, implying that only the Party can deliver it. Finally, stability has rationalised a coercive system of "stability maintenance" to address deep social divisions domestically, many resulting from rapid development without political reform.

Analysis

For much of China's pre-reform era under Mao Zedong, stability took a back seat to revolution and power struggle. Even as it suffered at home, the young PRC affirmed itself internationally as a force for stability, defending sovereignty and non-interference.[3]

As China emerged from the Cultural Revolution in 1975, a rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping attempted to calm ideological divisions and revive the economy. The second of Deng's "Three Directives" for government work was "stability and unity", which encouraged cessation of intra-Party struggles to focus on building national development. This suspension of the Party's class struggle displeased Mao: "Without struggle there can be no progress, no peace", he said.[4] Only three

years later, after another round of struggles, could Deng's vision be realised.

Under Deng in the 1980s, stability meant avoiding rancour to get on with business. Closely tied to reform and development, "economic stability" took centre stage. With economic stability, reforms could proceed; with reforms, economic development could accelerate; and accelerated development offered "an even stronger guarantee of stability". Stability also meant upholding CCP rule and ceasing internal discord. Deng emphasised "stability and unity" alongside the Four Basic Principles, which committed the nation to socialist rule and CCP leadership. Internationally, China understood stability as ensuring peaceful conditions — particularly between Cold War powers, the US and Soviet Union, but also in US-China relations.

In the late 1980s, Deng's equation linking reform, development and stability took shape in the slogan, "stability overrides everything". After Jiang Zemin took power following the June 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, this phrase became ubiquitous, as the crackdown was cast as a "counter-revolutionary riot" and an aberration that interrupted development. Like Deng, Jiang emphasised that "stability overrides everything". But as the economy boomed through the 1990s, spawning inequality and social unrest, Chinese society came under blanket policing through what the Party termed "stability maintenance" (维护稳定), or *weiwen*. Under Hu Jintao, mechanisms of pressure and control often provoked the social tensions they sought to suppress, resulting in costly repression and resistance scholars criticised as "rigid stability".[5]

Since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, stability maintenance has increasingly merged with national security, reflected in the "comprehensive national security concept", introduced April 2014. This concept has been applied with uncompromising resolve via social management, high-tech surveillance, and repression. Stability concerns drove concerted suppression of democracy protests in Hong Kong from 2014 onward, culminating in a robust national security regime in 2020. In Xinjiang, they prompted unprecedented security measures, including mass detention facilities for ethnic Uyghurs that sparked international condemnation. In 2022, Xi stated that "national security is the foundation of national rejuvenation and social stability is the prerequisite for national strength".[6] Stability fears have been deepened by structural challenges facing China's economy, including unemployment, so domestic stability remains closely tied to economic stability.

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Transparency 【透明度】

Malin Oud

Brief

Transparency refers to an environment in which policy and processes are open and predictable, and where decisions and information are provided to the public in a comprehensible, accessible, and timely manner. Freedom of information is an integral part of the human right to freedom of expression. Government transparency should be the norm and exceptions limited to issues such as national security, public safety, criminal investigations, privacy, and commercial confidentiality.

The Chinese leadership sees transparency as important to promote state legitimacy. But it treats it as a matter of discipline and top-down supervision, rather than as a question of press freedom and citizen participation. The right to "open government information" (政府信息公开) is recognised in law, but may not infringe upon the interests of the Party State. National security is frequently invoked in order to protect "state secrets". Compared to international standards and practice, China's definition of state secrets is overly broad and includes information that would "affect social stability" or "have an unfavourable influence" on China's foreign affairs. Information may be retroactively defined as "state secrets", and the maximum penalty for divulgence of state secrets is death.

Analysis

Greater access to government information was part of Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform and opening up launched in 1978. The constitutional right of Chinese citizens to supervise government was recognised and the concept of Open Village Affairs (村务公开) was introduced, in order to deal with local corruption. The political reforms championed by the Party in the 1980s came to a brutal halt with the suppression of the student protests in 1989, but the idea of "open government affairs" (政务公开) continued to gain prominence. Combatting corruption and building a "clean government" was seen as vital for the survival of the Party.[1]

The lack of government transparency came to the fore again in a series of disaster cover-ups in the 1990s and early 2000s. From the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Henan in the mid-1990s, to the SARS outbreak in 2002, the Songhua River chemical spill in 2004, and the melamine contaminated milk scandal in 2008, the political culture of secrecy and the lack of a free flow of information had devastating impacts on people's health and livelihoods, and lead to a public call for openness. The Chinese internet also acted as an important watchdog at this time, with investigative journalists exposing corruption and power abuse. Transparency was endorsed at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, as the necessary "sunshine" against corruption.[2]

In 2008, the first national regulation on Open Government Information (OGI) was introduced, providing enhanced access to government information for issues such as government budgets and expenditures; environmental pollution; food and drug safety; land takings and compensation; procurement and construction contracts; as well as greater transparency concerning the legislative process and court information.[3] Domestic NGOs and lawyers used the new OGI regulation to bring public interest litigation and to support advocacy on environmental pollution, discrimination, and other issues.

The effectiveness of the regulations was however always limited by the systemic lack of rule of law, media freedom and civil society oversight. To the Party, transparency means top-down supervision and control, and does not imply citizen supervision and public oversight. The major concern is with government efficiency and not with government accountability.[4] The role of the media is to transmit government messages and to perform a limited monitoring function exposing local corruption at the behest of the central leadership.[5] In Xi Jinping's era, investigate journalism has been curtailed and, in a reversal of previous trends, the government now actively limits access to government data online to prevent unwanted insights.

While the Party chases "tigers", "flies" and "foxes" both home and abroad in the name of transparency and anti-corruption, its internal governance and working methods remain a black box of secrecy, disappearances, and extrajudicial measures. Xi Jinping has used his signature anti-corruption campaign to take out both corrupt officials and political rivals. However, according to Xi, the Party's "courageous self-reform practice" and ability to "turn the blade inward and pluck out our own corrupt flesh" has provided a powerful answer to those who tout the Western system of democracy and separation of powers.[6]

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QUALIFIERS

Katja Drinhausen, David Bandurski and Malin Oud

Qualifiers are words or phrases used to limit, enhance or otherwise modify the meaning of other words or phrases. China's government uses a range of qualifiers in its domestic and international communication that indicate a specific interpretation and relay inherent criticism or expectations. In addition to the short descriptions, you can find examples of official quotes on our website under: https://decodingchina.eu/qualifier/.

Green
【绿色】

In Chinese Communist Party discourse, “green” (绿色) functions both as a reference to environmental policies and as a rhetorical device signaling political alignment with Party priorities. In the domestic political context, the qualifier can serve as a standard of political evaluation broadly signaling sustainability in policy-making–without, however, measurable criteria, such as the “concept of green governance” (绿色执政理念). In foreign policy, the qualifier can function to support claims. One example is that sustainability is a core value of Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative, which has supported projects with questionable environmental impacts. Another is the argument that Western tariffs on Chinese renewable energy products constitute “green protectionism” that undermines genuine environmental protection.

Non-governmental 【非政府】

In China's highly controlled system, the independent involvement of true civil society organisations on key policy issues is impossible. As Xi Jinping has said, echoing Mao Zedong: "Party, government, army, society and education — east and west, south and north, the Party leads all." Recognising the importance of civil society organisations in foreign countries and in the international system, however, the Chinese Communist Party has created a system of proxy organisations through which it can foster what it calls "people-to-people exchange" and seek influence in foreign countries, within the Chinese diaspora, and within the UN system. In this context, "non-governmental" (非政府) functions as a deceptive label that enables Party-state infiltration of genuine civil society spaces while cloaking CCP activities as independent advocacy.

Organisations that describe themselves as non-governmental, such as the China Society for Human Rights Studies or the All-China Journalists Association, are directly operated by CCP departments including the Central Propaganda Department and International Liaison Department, yet leverage this false civil society status to gain UN consultative positions and international legitimacy. In domestic contexts, the qualifier can serve to validate Party-state organisations as examples of China's thriving independent sector. In international settings, it functions to systematically undermine genuine civil society participation in organisations like the UN, where fake NGOs promote CCP narratives while claiming to represent independent Chinese voices and deflecting criticism through coordinated attack operations against Western human rights records.

Peaceful 【和平】

China's leaders frequently state that the PRC's desire for peace is rooted in traditional Chinese values as well as the country's own historical experiences of foreign aggression and colonisation. Its promise that China's rise will be fundamentally different from the expansionism of Western nations is enshrined in the "peaceful development" (和平发展) doctrine adopted in the 1950s.

Beijing maintains that its primary goal is domestic modernisation, which requires a stable, peaceful international environment, and that China's military power is for defensive purposes only. But China also forcefully defends its territorial claims against neighboring countries on land and sea and retains the right to use military force to assert its sovereignty over Taiwan.

In international conflicts, China promotes itself as a neutral mediator, such as in Ukraine, Gaza and simmering conflicts in the Middle East. It regularly offers to serve as a platform for talks and has published peace plans (albeit rather short and vague), while positioning itself as a force for post-war reconstruction. Despite participating in peace and humanitarian aid missions, the PRC maintains a strong policy of non-intervention.

People-centred 【以人为中心】

“People-centred” approaches in global development, humanitarian initiatives, and climate action aim to empower individuals and communities by promoting public participation and amplifying marginalised voices. In China, the phrase “people-centred” or “putting people first” (以人为本) has been a prominent Party slogan since the early 2000s. Historically, the term “people” has served as a political category in China, constituting the class-based population that the Chinese Communist Party claims to represent. The people and the Party are often conflated, suggesting that their interests are inherently aligned.

On the international stage, China advocates for “people-centred development” and for a “human rights system with a people-centred approach.” This is a critique of the prevailing global human rights framework, which focuses on individual rights and the obligations of states to respect and protect them. China’s interpretation of a people-centred approach tends to blur the lines between individual (人), people/collective (人民), and nationality (民族), thereby sidelining the rights of individuals and ethnic groups. Instead, it places an emphasis on individual contributions towards nation-building, thus prioritising societal goals over personal liberties.

Pragmatic
【务实】

China presents its policy as pragmatic (or practical) and results-oriented, both at home and abroad. Domestically, the Party claims to deliver efficient progress by prioritising practical solutions over ideological debates, despite ongoing campaigns to ensure that cadres and citizens adhere to CCP doctrine and support Xi Jinping's policy visions.

In its diplomatic relations (especially with liberal democracies), China promotes pragmatism as a focus on shared interests such as trade, scientific exchange, and global challenges, while setting aside contentious issues such as human rights, security concerns, or geopolitical competition. The implicit message is that failure to "properly handle" these differences will damage the relationship and cause economic harm.

Towards the Global South, China frames itself as a pragmatic actor offering "win-win" economic cooperation and access to global public goods without political conditions (in contrast to Western conditionality). China promises non-interference in domestic affairs, though it criticises pushback against its interests – such as trade barriers – as ideologically motivated.

Rational
【理性】

Domestically, China's government uses the term "rational" to legitimise policy decisions as scientific, modern and the most appropriate choice to address a given policy issue, whereas contestation is often described as irrational, misguided or instigated by a small minority of trouble-makers or external instigators.

In China's international communication, "rational" often appears alongside "pragmatic" and "constructive," conveying the message that counterparts should focus on shared benefits and constructive cooperation. For European governments, this term carries an expectation to prioritise economic interests and independence from the U.S as part of "true strategic autonomy". This requires setting aside disagreements on issues ranging from human rights and China's stance on Ukraine to overcapacity and technology-related security concerns.

Towards Global South countries, China calls for working together for a fair, equal and rational international order, that reflects the rising weight of emerging economies. At the same time, they are asked to refrain from siding with the US. The underlying message to all: opposing China is not rational, given its political clout and the economic benefits it offers.

Responsible
【负责任】

The Party argues that it has a historic responsibility to "serve the people" and derives its legitimacy from delivering tangible benefits. The CCP presents itself as the only organisation capable of guiding China's economic and technological rise while ensuring the creation of a "moderately prosperous society" and safeguarding social stability (which is often contrasted with the purported political turmoil of other nations).

On the global stage, China has responded to regular appeals by Western states to be a "responsible global stakeholder" by positioning itself as a responsible major power (负责任大国) that delivers concrete benefits and contributes to global public goods in areas such as economic growth, health, and climate. It highlights its constructive engagement in the United Nations, by engaging in peacekeeping and regularly paying its UN dues. China's initiatives—such as the BRI and its growing list of global initiatives on development, security and other areas— are presented as key pillars of the international order.

This narrative presents China as a peaceful, non-hegemonic, and solution-oriented alternative to Western countries, that is inclusive of developing nations– even as it shows a high willingness to exert high pressure when China's political and economic interests are at stake.

Scientific 【科学】

In Chinese Communist Party discourse, “scientific” can refer to empirical scientific methods, but more frequently functions as a rhetorical tool claiming rational legitimacy for Party decisions and policies. When officials describe “scientific” approaches outside clear references to science and technology, they typically mean these align with CCP priorities and represent a balanced consideration of Party objectives rather than adherence to empirical methodology. The term gained particular prominence within CCP political discourse with Hu Jintao’s guiding principle, the “Scientific Outlook on Development” (科学发展观), which claimed to correct unbalanced growth through more rational policies. In contemporary usage, such as describing Covid-19 policies as “scientific and precise” (科学精准), the qualifier primarily serves to portray political decisions as inevitable, rational outcomes rather than subjective policy choices, lending them an aura of objective truth.

So-called
【所谓的】

In Chinese Communist Party discourse, “so-called” can function to reference commonly used terms, but often serves as a rhetorical device to delegitimise concepts, ideas, or assertions that run counter to Party positions. When officials use this modifier in political contexts, they typically signal that the referenced concept is fabricated, hypocritical, or invalid from the Party’s perspective. The qualifier serves multiple rhetorical functions: it creates distance between the speaker and the concept being discussed, implies that the concept lacks legitimacy, and preemptively dismisses opposing viewpoints without necessitating substantive engagement with their factual basis. This qualifier is particularly effective in ideological and diplomatic disputes because it simultaneously acknowledges an opposing concept while indicating to the audience that it should be regarded with skepticism. In contemporary applications, Chinese state media routinely applies this qualifier to Western political concepts when criticising foreign policies or defending China against external criticism.

Western
【西方】

In Chinese political discourse, “Western” functions as a qualifier that positions certain nations and systems as fundamentally contrary to Chinese interests. Primarily referring to the United States and Western European countries, it portrays them as a cohesive bloc (美西方) despite clearly discernible differences. The term has evolved from Cold War depictions of imperialists to characterisations of declining powers attempting to contain China’s rise and preserve an outdated international order. Chinese officials and state media emphasise several negative attributes: historical colonialism, perceived hypocrisy in promoting “universal values,” economic exploitation of developing nations, and more recently, internal divisions and resistance to a more equitable global order. More recent discourse emphasises “China fear syndrome” (中国恐惧症) among Western nations, portraying their anxieties as unfounded given China’s peaceful rise and historically non-imperialistic approach to international relations — unlike the past of “conquest, genocide, slavery, colonialism, and exploitation” that on this definition characterises the West.

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