

THE GRAND STRATEGY OF XI JINPING'S CHINA: GOALS, COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL POWER AND POLICIES¹

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INTRODUCTION

China is a true country of superlatives and, at the same time, a Civilization-State and a Nation-State.² Its resurgence is striking and impactful, being today central in the calculations, behaviors and interactions of all regions and all other international actors, also contributing decisively to the centrality of the Asia-Pacific in world economy and geopolitics. But what are China's goals and ambitions? What means does it possess to promote its interests? And what policies and strategies does it employ to accomplish its goals? These questions are decisive for understanding the stance and direction of the current People's Republic of China (PRC), but the abundant literature on the country often fails in giving them due attention and to link the various dimensions involved. This article endeavors to answer those questions in an articulate manner, on the assumption that China's current grand strategy is inseparable from its "comprehensive national power", the perspectives of the dominant Communist Party of China (CPC) and, in particular, Xi Jinping, Secretary General of the CPC and President of the PRC since 2012. Our purpose is, therefore, to examine and explain the grand strategy of Xi's China.

Like other notions in the field of International Relations (IR), the concept of "grand strategy" is used with different meanings³. For example, Nina Silove unveils three meanings for "grand strategy" regarding which scholars disagree, labeling them 'grand plans', 'grand principles' and

ABSTRACT

What are China's goals and ambitions? What means does it use to promote its interests? And what policies and strategies does Beijing employ to accomplish its goals? In this article we seek to answer these questions by analyzing the grand strategy of Xi Jinping's China. Regarding the analysis, it appears that the grand strategy of Xi's China has gone too far too fast and that perhaps time and momentum are not yet on China's side.

Keywords: China, Xi Jinping, grand strategy, world order.

RESUMO

A GRANDE ESTRATÉGIA DA CHINA DE XI JINPING OBJETIVOS, PODER NACIONAL ABRANGENTE E POLÍTICAS

Quais são os objetivos e ambições da China? De que meios dispõe para a promoção dos seus interesses? E quais as políticas e estratégias que emprega na implementação dos seus fins? Neste artigo procuramos responder a essas questões, analisando a grande estratégia da China de Xi Jinping. Com a análise efetuada, parecemos que a grande estratégia da China

de Xi pode ter ido longe e avançado depressa de mais e que a dinâmica e o tempo poderão já não estar do lado da China.

Palavras-chave: China, Xi Jinping, grande estratégia, ordem mundial.

‘grand behavior’. Despite this distinction, the author considers that these three meanings are structurally similar in two important aspects: first, since they derive from the concept of strategy, they all involve two central elements, ends and means; second, they include three features that justify the sense of ‘grand’, i.e. long-term, holistic and important. Thus, N. Silove concludes that despite the dif-

ferences between the theorists, the basic outlines of grand strategy not only complement each other but are relatively convergent in essential aspects.⁴ Rebecca Friedman Lissner identifies three other approaches in literature: “grand strategy as variable”, which studies the origins of state behavior; “grand strategy as process”, concerning both strategic government planning and the more general form of decision-making; and “grand strategy as blueprint”, offering broad views with a view to understanding and/or influencing future behavior.⁵ In operational terms, we employ the expression “grand strategy” here on the basis of two definitions: that of Hal Brands, who considers that “a grand strategy represents an integrated scheme of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is the conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there”;⁶ and that of Peter Layton, who defines a grand strategy as “the art of developing and applying diverse forms of power in an effective and efficient way to try to purposefully change the relationship existing between two or more intelligent and adaptive entities”.⁷

At the theoretical level, we follow an “eclectic approach”, reaching out to the contribution of complexity theories. Above all, we draw from the theories of complexity the assumption of “nonlinearity” – that the result of behaviors and interactions is “naturally unpredictable” – and the notion of “complex adaptive systems”, emphasizing the ideas of complexity, co-adaptation and co-evolution of actors and the system. The “eclectic approach” assumes that none of the conventional theories of IR alone and by itself can encompass and explain the entire international reality which, by nature, is complex, dynamic, unpredictable, adaptive and coevolutionary. This assumption is even more relevant given the opposing views and proposals with often divide liberal, realist, constructivist, systemic, critical and other Western-based theories with regard to the behavior and interactions of non-Western actors such as China. Therefore, limiting the risk of alienating *a priori* aspects and variables that may be crucial, with pragmatism and prudence, the eclectic approach goes beyond the “natural expectations” of conventional theories, combining different explanatory hypotheses and taking advantage of the potential of complementarities.⁸ At the same time, the eclectic approach facilitates and favors inclusive links with non-Western IR theories, including Chinese.⁹

In methodological terms, the article relies on a descriptive-analytical model, based on the analysis of official speeches and documents, and drawing on specialized literature on the transformation of China and illustrative data and examples.

The text is organized in four parts, along which we also explain our arguments. The first part analyzes China's goals, showing how these matches those of the CPC and how they have grown in ambition with Xi Jinping's leadership. The second surveys China's comprehensive national power, justifying its economic base and Beijing's mounting self-confidence. The third is dedicated to Xi's international policy for China, showing that "diplomacy" is actively committed to creating a Sinocentric world and remaking the international order, based on soft power and on multiple free trade agreements and different bi, tri and multilateral mechanisms. In the fourth and final part, we demonstrate and argue how Xi's China has adopted a much more assertive and confrontational "wolf-warrior" strategy, from economic and diplomatic coercion to the threat and use of military force. And in the closing remarks, we summarize our arguments and question whether the grand strategy of Xi's China has not gone too far too fast and whether time and momentum remain on China's side.

**AMBITIONS AND GOALS OF THE CPC AND OF XI'S CHINA:
TO REALIZE COMMUNISM IN A NEW ERA AND THE CHINESE DREAM,
ACHIEVING A DOMINANT POSITION**

To understand China's grand strategy, it is crucial to begin by ascertaining its ambitions and objectives. To do so, we must consider the fusion between the interests and goals of the State and of the dominant CPC, as indeed ensues from Article 1 of the Constitution of the PRC: "Leadership by the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is prohibited for any organization or individual to damage the socialist system."¹⁰ Now, according to the Constitution of the CPC itself, "The Party's highest ideal and ultimate goal is the realization of communism".¹¹ This "ultimate goal" is pursued through what the Party calls the 'basic line', and which serves as a reference both for its mission and for the formulation of its policies:

"The basic line of the Communist Party of China in the primary stage of socialism is to lead all the people of China together in a self-reliant and pioneering effort, making economic development the central task, upholding the Four Cardinal Principles, and remaining committed to reform and opening up, so as to see China becomes a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful."¹²

First voiced by Deng Xiaoping and then inscribed in the Constitution of the CPC, these Four Cardinal Principles are "to keep to the path of socialism, to uphold the people's democratic dictatorship, to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and to uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought",¹³ principles that also form 'the foundation for building the country'.¹⁴ From the party's perspective, its leading role is the only way to restore China's strength, prosperity and prestige – in what is also the CPC's "original aspiration" and "mission," according to Xi Jinping.¹⁵

This precept is part of the logic of “historical continuity” which the party also underlines when stating that the “guidelines of its action” are the doctrines of the five consecutive top leaders of popular China:

“Mao Zedong Thought by combining the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism with the actual practice of the Chinese revolution... Deng Xiaoping Theory... shifted the focus of the whole Party’s work onto economic development and introduced reform and opening up... Jian Zemin Theory of Three Represents... Hu Jintao Scientific Outlook on Development...[and] Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”¹⁶

At the same time, Chinese leaders glorify China’s history and the Party’s “revolutionary tradition”, inscribing their efforts in the endeavor to “restore” China’s central position after what they characterize as the “century of humiliation”, which began in the mid-19th century with the opium wars and the ‘unequal treaties’ and lasted until the proclamation of the PRC in 1949. Indeed, since its creation in 1921, the CPC has portrayed itself as a champion of the cause of China’s reconstruction and resurgence. In short, as Xi Jinping repeatedly says, echoing his predecessors, “only socialism can save China – and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China.”¹⁷

On the other hand, China’s grand strategy must be understood in the light of two central ideas. The first is that of ‘comprehensive national power’, an expression that guides the development of Chinese capabilities in all areas, in an articulated way, also enabling the assessment of China’s evolution and its comparison to other powers in the international system. The second is the “strategic configuration of power”, underpinning the idea of “propensity of things”, and Chinese leaders describe the late 20th-century and early 21st-century as a “period of opportunity”. To this purpose, China would not need to force and even less impose its own emergence, it sufficing to take advantage of the “propensity of things” and the opportunities offered to naturally and gradually increase its broad national power and thus rise in the hierarchy of global power. It is therefore a long-term strategy that sets out the major objectives, priorities and milestones in all dimensions. Beijing characterizes its grand strategy as a national effort extending within the scope and reach of the transformation of China and, in turn, of the world. For Chinese leaders, “China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity.”¹⁸

Since the reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping from 1978, which have been responsible for China’s resurgence, the major goals have been outlined around the overall ambition to build a “moderately prosperous society in all aspects” by the mid-21st century. On the other hand, cultivating the idea of China’s “peaceful rise” and “win-win” cooperation, Beijing has generally pursued the so-called “24-character strategy”: observe quietly; maintain our position; engage in matters prudently; hide our capabilities and wait our turn; be good at keeping a low profile; and never claim the leadership. This formula was enunciated by Deng Xiaoping in 1990, in the wake of the tensions caused by the

'Tiananmen tragedy', followed by Jiang Zemin and then by Hu Jintao who, in 2009, changed the last characters to simply "keep a low profile" and "actively accomplish something". This last part can also be translated and interpreted as "displaying your prowess" and "assuming your responsibilities",¹⁹ denoting an adaptation to China's growing comprehensive national power and a response to international pressure, notably from the United States, for China to take on its responsibilities as a great power and "responsible stakeholder". Overall, Xi Jinping's predecessors believed that China should wait patiently for its turn, ensuring the necessary conditions to continue on the path of economic development – the key source of power serving all other domains – and constantly promoting the expansion of China's influence through tactical integration into the current world order.

This relatively low-profile stance of the PRC changed with Xi Jinping's rise to the leadership of the party and the State in 2012. Xi has centered power in himself and expressed an ideological orthodoxy unparalleled since Mao; he is impatient with the *status quo*, has a high tolerance for risk, promotes the "cult of personality" and is in a hurry to ensure China's international

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affirmation.²⁰ Jude Blanchette argues that Xi's calculations are determined by his timeline, "because he sees a narrow window of ten to 15 years during which Beijing can take advantage of a set of important technological and geopolitical transformations, which will also help it overcome significant internal challenges."²¹ The Chinese Government itself acknowledges that "China entered a new era after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012. President Xi Jinping has considered China's responsibilities from a global perspective"²². And at the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee which took place between 8 and 11 November 2021, the CPC adopted a resolution revising the official narrative of its history for the third time only since 1921,²³ cementing the position of Xi Jinping and his "Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", deemed the "quintessence of Chinese culture and soul" and reflecting "the common will of the Party, the armed forces, and the Chinese people of all ethnic groups, and is of decisive significance for advancing the cause of the Party and the country".²⁴

That change is notorious, to begin with, in the new ambitions expressed around key ideas such as the "New Era" and "Chinese Dream" or in public references to China's "leading" and "dominant" position. In a landmark speech to the 19th CPC Congress in 2017, which sums up much of his doctrine, Xi Jinping declared that China had achieved "a leading position in terms of economic and technological strength, defense capabilities, and composite national strength."²⁵ It thus justifies "Chinese socialism's

entrance into a New Era “, which, according to Xi, “it is of tremendous importance”.²⁶ New Era “means that scientific socialism is full of vitality in 21st century China.... blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations.”²⁷ Basically, what Xi’s New Era means is that China is on the threshold – to be crossed in the next three decades – of the realization of the “Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation”. And, in simple terms, “the Chinese Dream is to make the country strong”.²⁸ Therefore, the chief goal of the CPC and of the Chinese Government, in the words of Xi Jinping, is “to build a socialism that is superior to capitalism and laying the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position”.²⁹

Xi’s China has kept modernization at the heart of its action, but by implementing a new philosophy around the “Five-Sphere Integrated Plan” (to promote coordinated economic, political, cultural, social and ecological progress) and the “Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy” (to complete the construction of a moderately prosperous society in all respects, to deepen reforms, advance law-based governance and strengthen the party’s self-governance), so called since the 18th CPC National Congress of November 2012. In pursuance of its ambitions, Beijing establishes long-term phased plan, defining concrete goals and priorities for each of them. For its Strategy in the New Era, Xi’s China has drawn up a vast plan around two symbolically representative centennial landmarks:

“China’s national strategic goal is to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021 when the CPC celebrates its centenary; and the building of a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by 2049 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) marks its centenary.”³⁰

And unambiguously, at the ceremony that marked the 100th Anniversary of the CPC on July 1, 2021, Xi Jinping declared that China had already achieved the great goal of the first centenary, thus entering a new phase.³¹

In the time gap between the ‘two centenarians’, Xi’s China outlined intermediate goals for 2035 and established a comprehensive ‘two-phase’ modernization program to be accomplished by 2049. In the first phase, from 2021 to 2035, Beijing wants China to “basically” reach the initial levels of a “great modern socialist country”, and economic development remains a “central task”.³² By 2035, China will also seek to improve its “rule of law” status and internal governance systems, increase its technological strength to become a “global leader in innovation” and “basically” complete its military modernization. It also intends to develop a “major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” and “move closer to the center of the world stage”.³³

In the second phase, from 2035 to 2049, Beijing aims for China to complete its development and achieve “national rejuvenation”, i.e., become “prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious”. Among other goals, China intends to have,

at that point, “world-class” Armed Forces³⁴ and enjoy a position of “leadership” and “dominant” in a world order recast according to the vision of a “Global Community of Shared Future”.³⁵

THE “COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL POWER” OF THE NEW SUPERPOWER

China is the largest beneficiary of the post-“double Cold War” world order and the great winner of globalization. Even though Xi Jinping says that “there is no fundamental change in the trend towards a multipolar world”,³⁶ the growth of its broad national power makes China a true emerging superpower and gives the world power structure a more bipolar configuration. Beijing declares that “the world is undergoing the greatest changes in a century”³⁷ and considers that “the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced”.³⁸ For its part, Washington recognizes that “the distribution of power across the world is changing... China, in particular, is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”.³⁹

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The basis of this Chinese resurgence is economic. With continued and sharp growth over the past few decades, China has become the world’s second largest economy in nominal terms and the largest in purchasing power parities (ppp), with a share in world GDP in ppp jumping from 4% in 1990 to more than 19% in 2021 – period during which the United States’ share dropped from 22% to less than 16%.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, China became the largest exporter and also the world’s largest importer, with shares of 17.81% in world exports and 14.74% in global imports,⁴¹ and the chief trading partner of more than 120 countries, including the other major economies: by 2020, for example, China was the first partner of the U.S. (representing a share of 11.9% of total U.S. exports and imports), Japan (with a share of 23.4% in overall Japanese foreign trade), India (12%), South Korea (25.3%), Australia (37.3%), the ASEAN10 group (24.4%) or the EU27 (surpassing the US for the first time and with China representing a share of 16.1% of all external trade of the EU).⁴²

“The world’s factory”, China is the largest supplier of many products and components, but also of certain strategic and sensitive resources: for example, a recent report by the European Commission shows that China alone accounts for 52% of the total amount of imports from the European Union (EU) of strategic products from third countries, also representing 80% of the US imports and 98% of EU imports of “rare earths” – composed of 17 metals used as vital components for all types of high-tech products.⁴³ At the same time, China is the largest market for almost everything from agricultural products to cement, from drugs to cars, computers or mobile phones – crucial, therefore, to the production and exports of developed and developing countries.

At the same time, China has become the world's largest consumer and importer of energy, which, if, on the one hand, brings new risks and challenges to China's economic development and conditions Beijing's external relations in the search for safe suppliers and routes, on the other hand, makes China a particularly attractive partner for many exporters of raw materials, oil and natural gas, with China today being a key player in the global geopolitics of energy and in various regions of the globe rich in energy resources. Similarly, China has become the largest CO₂ emitter, accounting for about 30% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions – which negatively impacts China's global image and has forced Beijing to accelerate energy transition and environmental protection

CHINA'S ECONOMIC, COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL POWER ENABLES BEIJING TO DEVELOP CHINESE POWER IN ALL OTHER DIMENSIONS, FROM CULTURE TO DEFENSE, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY OR DIPLOMACY.

measures, but also makes China inescapable in the global efforts against climate change.

China's economic, commercial and industrial power enables Beijing to develop Chinese power in all other dimensions, from culture to defense, science, technology or

diplomacy. For example, China is now a major technology power, having dethroned the U.S. from the top position among countries with the highest patent registration for the first time in 2019, to which must be added the four Chinese conglomerates in the top 10 of patent registering companies in the world in a ranking led throughout consecutive years by China's Huawei Technologies.⁴⁴ China has also expanded its cultural presence: for example, in 2000, China had no cultural institutes in Africa, currently having the second largest number of these institutes (Confucius) on the African continent, surpassing the British Council, the German Goethe Institute and the American centers. Similarly, greater economic resources have allowed Beijing to significantly increase its defense budget, usually in the order of double digits annually (and always above Chinese GDP growth), Chinese military spending having increased by 76% in the 2011-2020 decade alone, according to SIPRI⁴⁵. Although far from the U.S. defense budget, China is rapidly increasing its share of total global military spending (13% by 2020) and increasingly distancing itself from other major powers.⁴⁶ At the same time, the PRC – a nuclear power since 1964 and whose People's Liberation Army (EPL) is the largest army in the world, currently relying on nearly two million active troops – has carried out a broad “revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics”, strengthening and modernizing its capabilities, namely sea, air, missile, nuclear, transport, communications, space and cybernetics.⁴⁷ For example, according to the Pentagon, in its “anti-access” and “area denial” strategy, the PRC aims to quadruple the number of long-range missiles and increase the number of nuclear warheads from 300 to 1,000 over the next ten-fifteen years. According to the Japanese Ministry of Defense, between 1991 and 2021, China went from zero to 1,1⁴⁶ fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, from zero to 51 modern submarines or zero to 71 frigates and modern destroyers.⁴⁸ The U.S. Department of Defense recognizes, moreover, that

“China has already achieved parity with – or even exceeded – the United States in several military modernization areas... RPC has the world’s largest navy... China is the world’s top ship-producing nation by tonnage and is increasing its shipbuilding capacity and capability for all naval classes.”⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the Chinese regime has been highly committed to the development of civil-military fusion, notably with efforts in the merger between defense and civil industrial and technological bases⁵⁰. On the other hand, China has increased its influence on the global arms market: although more self-sufficient, it remains a major importer (fifth in the period 2016-2020) and has also become one of the largest arms suppliers (also fifth in that ranking).⁵¹

The strengthening of China’s “comprehensive national power” enables Beijing to have more and better means to promote its ends. At the same time, it also makes Xi Jinping’s China more self-confident and assertive in its ambitions and claims.

«XIPLOMACY»: CREATING A SYNOCENTRIC WORLD AND REMAKING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER UNDER CHINA’S LEADERSHIP

Xi’s China continues to claim that its foreign policy is based on the traditional Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (mutual respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of each, non-aggression, non-interference in home affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence), pursues a “peaceful development” and a “peaceful rise”, and “will never seek hegemony”. This is constantly reiterated in the most varied official documents and speeches, including the *China and the World in the New Era* white paper published in 2019 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the proclamation of the PRC, specifically “to respond to the world’s questions about China”.⁵² The same ideas are reaffirmed by Xi Jinping, as he did in his address at the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, the year in which the centenary of the CPC was celebrated and also the 50th anniversary of popular China’s accession to the UN:

“we must strengthen solidarity and promote mutual respect and win-win cooperation in conducting international relations... China has never and will never invade or bully others, or seek hegemony... China will continue to bring the world new opportunities through its new development.”⁵³

At the same time, as part of the narrative of the New Era and the Chinese Dream, Beijing promotes what it calls the “Community of Common Destiny for Humanity” or “Global Community of the Shared Future”:

“China’s proposal to build a global community of shared future aims to solve the practical issues facing the world today and realize the peaceful and sustainable development

of humanity. The proposal pursues the goal of universal harmony and the principles of cooperation and mutual benefit, while opposing the law of the jungle, power politics and hegemonism.”⁵⁴

However, these principles and rhetoric do not inhibit Xi from also assuming, overtly, the goal of making China a “global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence”.⁵⁵ In fact, alongside the cult of “emperor” Xi Jinping, the “xiplomacy” marks a new approach to Chinese foreign policy which is much more affirmative, proactive and assertive both for the benefit of a Sinocentric Asia and world and for the recasting of the international order.

Asia is, of course, the priority region of Chinese foreign policy, towards which Xi Jinping declares a kind of ‘Monroe Doctrine with Chinese characteristics’ and of ‘Asian co-prosperity sphere with Chinese characteristics’:

“In the final analysis, let the people of Asia run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia.... The outside countries, on their part, should respect the diversity of our region and do their part to facilitate its development and stability»⁵⁶; “Asian countries have advanced regional economic integration and worked in union to pursue both economic and social development... As an important member of the Asian family, China has kept deepening reform and opening-up while promoting regional cooperation...the extraordinary journey of China...has exerted a significant influence in boosting development in Asia and beyond.”⁵⁷

In this line also are slogans such as “New Concept of Asian Security”, “Asia for Asians”, “Asian Dream”, “Global Asia” or “Asian Community of Shared Destiny”,⁵⁸ which have helped promote Xi’s Asian vision and policy since 2012, appearing to be part of a strategy to rebuild a Sinocentric Asian order.

On the other hand, Beijing makes a “distinction between three elements of the ‘U.S.-led world order’: ‘the American value system’, ‘the U.S. military alignment system’; and ‘the international institutions including the UN system’.”⁵⁹ Thus, when Chinese leaders, and Xi specifically, talk about “supporting the international order”, they are referring solely to the third of those elements:

“There is only one international system, i.e. the international system with the United Nations at its core. There is only one international order, i.e. the international order underpinned by international law. And there is only one set of rules, i.e. the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.”⁶⁰

This support for the UN is evinced, for instance, by the fact that China has become the only one of the five permanent members of the Security Council to be simultaneously

positioned among the largest financial contributors to the UN's peacekeeping budget (second place in that ranking) and the largest contributors with military personnel in UN missions (tenth in that ranking).⁶¹

But not only that. Xi's China intends, moreover, to change the international system and order and claims "taking a lead in reforming and developing the global governance system."⁶² And for this reform, Beijing uses all the instruments of its soft and hard powers.

FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS: EXPANDING SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS THROUGH THE CHANNELS OF CAPITALISM

China uses the weight of its economy and the size of its market to exercise its power of attraction and influence. In addition to China's bilateral partnerships – of diverse types and scopes – with dozens of countries and organizations from all regions of the world, Beijing has established free trade agreements with Cambodia, Mauritius, the Maldives, Georgia, Australia, South Korea, Switzerland, Iceland, Costa Rica, Peru, Singapore, New Zealand, Chile, Pakistan and ASEAN. On top of this, the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA) and ongoing negotiations with a view to other free trade agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council, Sri Lanka, Israel, Norway, Moldova, Panama, Palestine, Colombia, Fiji, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Canada, Bangladesh and Mongolia, as well as the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral one.⁶³

Taking advantage of "contexts of opportunity", the PRC seized, for example, the 1997-1998 economic and financial crisis in South-East Asia, as an opportunity to increase its influence over these countries, as subsequently it also exploited the difficulties of many States, including Europeans, following the 2008-2010 global economic crisis, to promote their investments, credits and free trade agreements, expanding China's omnipresence and soft power. Similarly, the crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic has favored and accelerated the economic and commercial centrality of Xi's China, forthwith because among the major economies it was the only one that recorded GDP growth in 2020, and one of those expected to grow the most in 2021 and in the following years⁶⁴ – which is rather paradoxical, considering that this pandemic originated in China. Beijing does indeed show a particular ability to take advantage of all opportunities and, for instance, in the context of the protectionism inherent in President Donald Trump's "America first" slogan, China's support for economic globalization and free trade has repeatedly been pointed out: "Economic globalization is an irreversible consequence of global economic development... Some countries have...resorted to unilateral, protectionist, and hegemonic actions...driving the world economy towards the 'recession trap'."⁶⁵

More recently, in the period between Trump's defeat and President Biden's inauguration, Xi's China signed with 14 other Asia-Pacific partners – ten countries from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),⁶⁶ Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand – on 15 November 2020 the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP),

establishing the largest free trade area in the world; and on December 30, 2020, China and the EU reached an agreement in principle on the bilateral Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). Meanwhile, on September 16, 2021, the day after the announcement of AUKUS (a new alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States), China formalized its application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP or TPP 11) – established in 2016 by the United States and 11 other Pacific coastal countries,⁶⁷ but from which President Trump had withdrawn the U.S. in 2017. All this is a symptom of Chinese soft power, but also of an increasingly Sinocentric globalization and remaking of the international system, including mechanisms and areas of free trade in which China is present with a leadership role and the U.S. simply is not.

MULTILATERALISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM IN A “TWO-LEG STRATEGY”

In fact, “xiplomacy” has proved very active in the use of multilateral frameworks to expand Chinese influence and reformulate the international order in a ‘two-leg strategy’: on the one hand, it performs a diplomacy of “embedded revisionism”, that is, acting within the scope of the “UN-universe” and the other international organizations of which it became a member and which were established, essentially, by the US and its allies and partners; on the other hand, it creates and develops new mechanisms and

institutions centered in China.

BEIJING HAS BEEN PARTICIPATING IN AND, ABOVE ALL, CREATING “PARALLEL REALITIES”, I.E., NUMEROUS MECHANISMS FOR BILATERAL, TRILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION.

Towards the end of the ‘double Cold War’, the PRC had already been a permanent member of the UNSC since 1971, and of the IMF and the World Bank since 1980, when it took the place previously held by the Republic of China/Taiwan at these institu-

tions. And despite the tensions caused by the Tiananmen tragedy, it was rapidly integrated into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1991, the year in which the China-ASEAN Dialogue was also established. More important, subsequently, would be China’s membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. China has also been part of multiple other multilateral mechanisms and dialogues, from the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to the G20, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC), to the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Container Security Initiative (CSI) and “six party talks” on the North Korean nuclear and missile program. Inevitably, China’s influence on these bodies and frameworks has been increasing in tandem with the growth of its comprehensive national power – as seen in the World Health Organization (WHO) in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, Beijing has been participating in and, above all, creating “parallel realities”, i.e., numerous mechanisms for bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation. Examples of this are the China-Russia-India strategic triangle and the

China-Japan-South Korea trilateral dialogue; groups such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), ASEAN+3 (China, South Korea and Japan) and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), currently with nine members – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, since 2001; India and Pakistan since 2017; and Iran in 2021 – as well as three “observers” which are now candidates for accession (Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) and nine other “dialogue partners” (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey and, since 2021, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia).

The “Sinocentric system” also involves the New Development Bank (NDB) set up by BRICS and a number of other dialogue and cooperation frameworks, such as the China-Africa Summit and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum, the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, the Boao Forum for Asia, China International Import Expo, the Hongqiao International Economic Forum, the China-ASEAN Expo, the China-Arab States Expo, the China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo, the Conference on dialogue of Asian Civilizations, the World Internet Conference, the Macao Forum with Portuguese-speaking countries and China+17 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Greece. The most emblematic of Xi’s China initiatives and its centrality is the “New Silk Road” – Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or One Belt One Road (OBOR) – presented by Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI/OBOR is a paradigmatic model of diplomacy, in line with “going out-bringing in” and “the go global”, representing a powerful instrument to strengthen Beijing’s cooperation with countries and regional groups – from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the EU, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or the African Union (AF) -, multiplying, moreover, platforms such as Digital Silk Road, Green Silk Road, Polar Silk Road or Health Silk Road. Under the BRI, China has already signed agreements with more than 160 countries and international organizations from all regions of the globe,⁶⁸ from Pakistan to Australia, Thailand, Singapore, Portugal, Greece, Turkey and Italy, thus including members of NATO, EU, Quad and the G7.

To financially support BRI’s projects, Xi’s China created the Silk Road Fund in 2014 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) the following year. When AIIB started operations in January 2016, it had 57 founding Member States; it currently has 91 members and 12 more potential members.⁶⁹ Having become the third largest multilateral financial institution in the world after the IMF and the World Bank, AIIB is a catalyst for the formation of a new financial order. In addition, in May 2017 and April 2019, Beijing organized and hosted, respectively, the first and second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), with representatives from more than 140 States and organizations, including dozens of heads of state and government. The list of results of the first BRF presents a total of 1676 projects and the second BRF includes 283 new concrete projects.⁷⁰

The BRI contributes to Xi's China's diversifying supply and distribution routes, increasing its economic, commercial and financial weight in the countries and regions involved, and, of course, increasing its political influence and geopolitical and geostrategic aims. For instance, China possesses more ports in its territory than any other country in the world, and, additionally, Chinese companies, mostly State-owned or controlled by Beijing, have already invested and acquired exploration rights in more than 100 ports in more than 60 countries, including many of international importance such as Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), Darwin (Australia), Haifa New Port (Israel), Kumport (Turkey), Piraeus (Greece) or Rotterdam (Netherlands), as well as in about one fifth of African ports.

Since its launch, the BRI has elicited multiple reactions and debates.⁷¹ For Beijing, the BRI “contributed to policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity based on the needs of individual countries”,⁷² Xi insisting that his initiative “pursues development, aims at mutual benefits, and conveys a message of hope”.⁷³ For Washington, however, “Countries participating in OBOR could develop economic dependence on PRC capital and be subject to predatory lending, which the PRC could leverage to pursue its geopolitical interests.”⁷⁴ Well aware of the powerful instrument that the BRI represents in Xi's China grand strategy, President Biden suggested to America's

BOTH WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BRI AND IN ALL INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS, BEIJING ENDEAVORS TO CONVEY ITS IDEAS AND PROMOTE ITS MESSAGES.

allies and partners that “we should have, essentially, a similar initiative, pulling from the democratic states”⁷⁵. And, in fact, the G7 Summit of 11-13 June 2021 agreed on develop an alternative initiative to the New Chinese Silk Road led by democracies. Both within the framework of the BRI and in all institutions and mechanisms, Beijing endeavors to convey its ideas and promote its messages. Xi Jinping himself stresses this importance: “We should seek other countries' understanding of and support for the Chinese dream.... We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world.”⁷⁶ The declaration of the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) reflects the Chinese narrative well: “We applaud that, under the Belt and Road Initiative, the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits is observed”; “we firmly uphold multilateralism and oppose all forms of unilateralism and protectionism”; “we advocate mutual respect and equal consultation, firmly reject Cold-War mentality”.⁷⁷ And also in the final joint communiqué of the first Belt and Road Forum, the 30 participating heads of State and government avowed “the spirit of peace, cooperation, openness, transparency, inclusiveness, equality, mutual learning, mutual benefit and mutual respect.”⁷⁸

In another example, the connectivity promoted through the BRI has been displayed by Beijing in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: “Connecting over 100 cities across

more than 20 countries in Europe and Asia, the China Railway Express to Europe has made an outstanding contribution to stabilizing international industrial and supply chains during the Covid-19 pandemic”.⁷⁹

The “good Chinese narrative” is also conveyed through vigorous campaigns in State-owned media, cyber social networks and Beijing-controlled influencers or via the publication of a multitude of official English-language white papers – in a total of 76 between 2012 and 2021 alone, in increasing numbers annually and covering a wide range of subjects, from human rights and democracy in China to its relations with the WTO, environmental protection, Tibet and Xinjiang issues, Chinese policies for the Arctic and Africa, the South China Sea or space activities.⁸⁰

Xi’s China’s soft power inhibits many governments from criticizing Beijing or leads them to support Chinese policies and Chi-

XI’S CHINA’S SOFT POWER INHIBITS MANY GOVERNMENTS FROM CRITICIZING BEIJING OR LEADS THEM TO SUPPORT CHINESE POLICIES AND CHINESE CANDIDATES FOR UN AGENCIES AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

nese candidates for UN agencies and other international institutions. This is noticeable in the many resistances to American pressure stemming from decoupling from China, restrictions on Chinese 5G or Huawei technology, or the lack of cohesion of certain organizations, including NATO, the EU and ASEAN, in assuming unambiguous and tougher positions against Beijing. For instance, in October 2020, in opposition to a 39-country declaration criticizing Beijing for the imposition of the new Hong Kong National Security Law, a group of 54 countries (including 27 African ones) signed a declaration of support for the PRC.

“WOLF-WARRIOR” STRATEGY

In order to achieve the goals under the banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era”, and in addition to the concentration of power in Xi Jinping, China has been issuing a vast set of legislation which, under the pretext of strengthening the “rule of law” or the fight against corruption and terrorism, almost invariably ends up serving to reinforce the regime’s control and vigilance over businesses, citizens and new technologies.⁸¹ Also to this end, there is the tight State control of cyberspace and social networks, the increasingly large-scale coverage of video and audio surveillance, “smart sensors” and “smart cities” or the new “social credit” program with the awarding and withdrawal of points (and subsequent social rewards/punishments) depending on their political and civic behavior. Illustrative of Chinese peculiarity and of the strategy of Beijing’s regime to control the various sectors of society, to silence putative critical movements and to encourage favorable voices, is the promotion of “government-organized non-governmental organizations” or GONGO, in various areas, from the environment to ethnic minorities.⁸² At the same time, Beijing has stepped up repression in provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang and has limited the democratic freedoms and autonomy of its special admin-

istrative regions of Macao and Hong Kong – here in particular with the imposition of the new National Security Law on 30 June 2020, to all practical effects putting to rest the principle of “one country, two systems”, in breach of the Hong Kong Basic Law and the commitment with the United Kingdom.

The reinforcement of repressive mechanisms in Xi’s China is in line with a much more assertive and often even confrontational stance in its external relations. Overall, this stance can be referred to as the strategy of the “wolf-warrior”, an expression taken from the series of Chinese films with the same title very popular in China.⁸³

This stance is visible in the more frequent use of economic coercion to sanction condemning governments and certain options of other countries, whether threatening or imposing a ban on imports, increased tariffs, restrictions on investment, suspension of credits, boycotts of products and other measures to change the behavior of those targeted and to discourage others from pursuing similar actions. For example, in 2016, after the Dalai Lama’s visit to Mongolia, Beijing suspended talks on a crucial aid loan, increased import rates on Mongolian minerals and temporarily closed a major border crossing. The following year, it was South Korea’s turn to suffer economic and diplomatic pressure from Beijing after approving the installation on its territory of the U.S. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. More recently, after Australia called for an independent investigation into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic in China, Beijing suspended beef imports from Australian factories, imposed an 80.5% tariff on its barley exports to Australia and also imposed restrictions on Australian coal imports. Private companies too have been sanctioned: after publishing a statement in September 2020 expressing concern about forced labor in Xinjiang, Swedish clothing company H&M was heavily criticized by the Ministry of Commerce and by the Chinese media and was the subject of a widespread boycott of its products in China and banned from several Chinese digital platforms, with a 28% drop in sales and having to close more than 20 stores in China in the first months of 2021 alone.⁸⁴

In addition to economic sanctions, Beijing has also been reacting harshly via diplomatic and technological boycotts, public accusations and expulsion or a ban on entry into Chinese territory, engaging in successive frictions with a growing number of countries, from the United States to Lithuania, Australia, Canada, the UK or the EU. For instance, at the end of March 2021, in reaction to the EU’s approval of sanctions against four Chinese leaders for violations of Uighur rights in the Xinjiang region (alongside the United States, Canada and the UK, in what were EU’s first sanctions since the Tiananmen tragedy in 1989), Beijing has sharply retaliated with sanctions of its own and a ban on entry into Chinese territory directed at ten European citizens (including five Members of the European Parliament) and four entities (including the EU Council’s Political and Security Committee and the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights),⁸⁵ with a statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry accusing the EU of “seriously harming China’s sovereignty and interests and maliciously spreading lies

and misinformation” and threatening that “if the EU does not correct its error, there will be more measures”.⁸⁶

On another occasion, in November 2021, Beijing downgraded its diplomatic relations with Lithuania to the “charge d’affaires” level days after Vilnius authorized the opening of a representative Taiwan office with the formal designation of Taiwanese Representative office – instead of “Chinese Taipei” which Beijing accepts and is the name used by most international countries and organizations to avoid offending the PRC –, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry stating that this decision by the Lithuanian Government “undermined China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and created a “bad international precedent”.⁸⁷

On the other hand, Xi Jinping states that “One country’s success does not have to mean another country’s failure”,⁸⁸ but Xi’s China’s challenging of the United States is no longer “soft” and indirect but rather “hard” and straightforward. Competition between the US and China is not new, and has been fueled for decades by many differences, divergences and disputes, but in recent years relations between the two have deteriorated substantially. For instance, China’s latest defense white paper states that “International strategic competition is on the rise”, directly accusing the U.S. of “adopting unilateral policies”, “provoking and intensifying competition”, “undermining global strategic stability” and seeking “absolute military superiority”.⁸⁹

More confident with the growth of its comprehensive national power and sensing the American decline, Xi’s China began to react to Washington’s policies “in kind”, from tariff warfare to technological boycotts, sanctions on American companies, public accusations using belligerent rhetoric, arrest of alleged spies or expulsion and prohibition of entry into its territory of American citizens, politicians and NGOs. This competitive tension has increased since the Obama Administration, escalating during the Trump Presidency and worsening in 2020 in the context of the pandemic crisis of Covid-19 and the campaign for the U.S. presidential election. Xi’s assertiveness and defiant stance contributed greatly to the bipartisan consensus that emerged in the United States for a tougher approach to Beijing, which rose in tone again during the Biden presidency.⁹⁰

Beijing has reacted with hostility to neo-containment maneuvers promoted by the United States, including accusations that Quad and AUKUS represent attempts to create an “Asian NATO” or that Washington is triggering a “new arms race” and “threatens regional and international peace and stability.” According to Xi Jinping,

“We must not allow the rules set by one or a few countries be imposed on others... Big countries should behave in a manner befitting their status... Attempts to “erect walls” or “decouple” run counter to the law of economics and market principles... We must reject the Cold War and zero-sum mentality and oppose a new “Cold War”... Bossing others around or meddling in others’ internal affairs would not get one any support.”⁹¹

In fact, Xi and Biden state that they do not wish for a “new Cold War”, but the mere fact that they mention it is by itself highly significant – and in practice they both seem committed to promoting it, for internal and external reasons.

At the same time, Beijing has strengthened its ties and partnerships with countries and regimes outcast by the “American international order”, from North Korea to Myanmar, Cuba, Venezuela or Iran, as well as with partners and allies of the U.S. currently more at odds with Washington, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. With Putin’s Russia in particular, Xi’s China nurtures a close articulation that has intensified since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 as part of the bilateral “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”⁹² Russia is China’s main supplier of energy and arms, and this strategic and military articulation also involves pressures that seem timed, i.e., Moscow’s over Ukraine and Beijing’s over Taiwan, as happened in the spring and fall of 2021. In the same line, Russia basically replicated China’s arguments by criticizing the AUKUS and, in early October 2021, conducted the Joint Sea 2021 bilateral naval exercises in the Sea of Japan, and at the end of that month conducted the first

THE USE OF THE MILITARY INSTRUMENT IS, IN FACT, ANOTHER FEATURE OF XI’S CHINA GRAND STRATEGY.

joint China-Russia patrol exercise in the Western Pacific. This PRC-Russia quasi-alliance does not ensue from their condition of members of an “autocratic international”, but from their shared belief that

this serves both their respective geopolitical goals: to contain the supremacy of the United States, to divide the West and the democratic powers, to suppress liberal political influences in international organizations and conventions and to change the world order.

The use of the military instrument is, in fact, another feature of Xi’s China grand strategy. Far beyond the promotion of its “contribution” to international security in UN missions or the “low cost, low risk and high performance” strategy in Africa.⁹³ For instance, despite repeatedly claiming that it would never have military bases in foreign countries, Beijing established its first foreign (naval) military base in Djibouti, in August 2017, with a contingent of more than ten thousand troops, strategically at the crossroads of the BRI’s trade and energy routes. And according to the Pentagon,

“The PRC is pursuing additional military facilities to support naval, air, ground, cyber, and space power projection in countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola and Tajikistan.”⁹⁴

Adding to the multiple Chinese incursions into the areas disputed with India and along the extensive Line of Actual Control (LAC), in June 2020, a skirmish between military

personnel on both sides of the Galwan valley, in a Himalayan border region, resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers, marking the first loss of lives at LAC since 1975. A few days later, satellite images showed what appear to be Chinese military facilities near the site of this incident, facilities that were not there beforehand.⁹⁵

Another example is the establishment, for the first time in November 2013, of a PRC's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, overlapping part of the ADIZ previously outlined by Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, and including in the Chinese ADIZ the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai islands and the Ieodo/Suyan/Socotra Rock whose sovereignty Beijing disputes with Tokyo and Seoul, respectively. Indeed, in recent years, China's activities in disputed areas in the East China Sea have intensified, including a significant increase in incursions of Chinese aircraft and warships and coast guard into territorial waters and airspace near the Japanese Senkaku Islands, in what Japan and the United States consider to be a Chinese strategy to "unilaterally change the status quo".⁹⁶

XI'S CHINA'S STANCE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ILLUSTRATES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEIJING'S RHETORIC AND PRACTICE.

The same can be said of Xi's China's stance in the South China Sea, which also illustrates the difference between Beijing's rhetoric and practice. China claims 80% to 90% of the South China Sea on the basis of the "nine-dash line" it drew up unilaterally decades ago on the basis of alleged "historical rights", including the disputed Parcel and Spratly archipelagos and the Scarborough Shoal Reef/Macclesfield Bank and overlapping both sovereignty areas and territorial waters and the EEZ claimed by several Southeast Asian states – the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam.⁹⁷ In July 2016, following a case lodged by the Philippines, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that "China's claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the 'nine-dash line' are contrary to the Convention [UNCLOS] and without lawful effect".⁹⁸ However, despite constantly claiming to defend a "rules-based order" and being part of the UN Convention on the Law of the SEA (UNCLOS), Beijing not only does not respect the decision of the PCA⁹⁹, it has also since then intensified the militarization and the reinforcement of its positions in the South China Sea, including the continued construction of landfills on the islands, atolls and reefs it controls, the expansion of military infrastructure, frequent military exercises, successive incidents with vessels and aircraft from other countries, and the replication of its administration in the disputed islands and reefs,¹⁰⁰ creating *de facto* situations and appearing to wish to impose some kind of *mare nostrum* or *mare clausum*¹⁰¹.

Xi's China has become even more aggressive toward Taiwan, escalating its threats of use of force with activities that include multiple, successive and increasingly powerful military exercises and incursions into Taiwanese airspace and sea. In 2020, Beijing publicly refuted the existence of the "median line" in the Taiwan Strait which had existed

for decades by tacit agreement with the purpose of reducing the risk of miscalculations and preventing accidents. And, for instance, in early October 2021, in the days immediately following the 72nd anniversary of People's Republic of China and as part of those celebrations, more than 150 Chinese fighters and bombers entered Taiwan's ADIZ, sharpening tensions and leading Biden to call his counterpart Xi on the phone and subsequently to the first bilateral summit between the two presidents, which would take place online on November 15th, 2021.¹⁰²

This Chinese military pressure is accompanied by a relentless bellicose rhetoric, as exemplified by the repeated warning that any move towards Taiwan's independence "means war."¹⁰³ The menacing tone is verbalized by Xi Jinping himself. For instance, on January 2, 2019, in a speech celebrating the 40th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's "Message to the Compatriots of Taiwan", Xi stressed that "China must be and will be reunified... We make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means."¹⁰⁴ And in his speech celebrating the 100th anniversary of PRC on July 1, 2021, he reiterated that

"Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China... We must take resolute action to utterly defeat any attempt toward "Taiwan independence"... No one should underestimate the resolve, the will and the ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁰⁵

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Overall, Xi's China's goals can be summarized in the following list of priorities: maintaining the CPC's "leading role" in building "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "the realization of communism"; preserving Chinese sovereignty against "external interference" in its "internal affairs"; preserving territorial integrity (including in the South and East China Seas and other territorial and border claims) and completing "China's unification" (Taiwan question); promoting the growth of its "comprehensive national power" and "the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation"; "restoring China's central position" and "rebuilding" the international system, with China in a "dominant" position; "reforming" the world order and global governance, with China in the "leading" a "global community of shared future". Meanwhile, Xi's China has anticipated some of the goals outlined earlier and defined new ones in an ambitious plan linked to two symbolic "centenaries": that of CPC in 2021 and that of PRC in 2049. According to Xi Jinping, China has already achieved the great goal associated with the first centenary of "completing the construction of a moderately prosperous society in all aspects" thus entering a new phase aimed at "building a modern socialist country" by the second centenary.

Xi's China's grand strategy for the "New Era" seems to be successful, accelerating the growth of its comprehensive national power and elevating it to the category of new

superpower. Taking advantage of its economic and commercial weight and the opportunities coming its way, “diplomacy” has been successful in attracting free trade partners and agreements and promoting its influence in international institutions through the “two-leg strategy”: taking action within the organizations created essentially by the U.S. and its allies and partners – from the UN to the IMF, World Bank, APEC and WTO – and, on the other hand, creating new frameworks and mechanisms centered on China, from the BRICS to SCO, BRI, AIIB and RCEP. As a whole, economic and commercial ties and bi, tri and multilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanisms are an exceptional means for Xi’s China to promote not only its development goals but also its geopolitical agenda: increasing influence in its neighborhood and in the world, boosting Beijing’s regulatory role as a producer of alternative rules and principles, nurturing the image of a responsible major global power, coming forth as a model of modernization for developing countries and autocratic regimes, dividing the “West” and discouraging the creation of a large anti-China coalition and logics such as that of ‘anyone but China’. At the same time, Xi’s China abandoned the low profile stance inherent in the “24-character strategy” of its predecessors since Deng Xiaoping, adopting instead a much more assertive, challenging and even confrontational “wolf-warrior” strategy, in an effort to hasten the achievement of its goals, sanctioning and deterring its detractors and creating an area of influence, whether through economic and diplomatic coercion or by threatening to use military power, particularly in South Asia, the South and Eastern China Seas and against Taiwan.

Xi’s China seems unstoppable, but there are many challenges facing its way, both internally and externally. The new superpower status attracts friends, but also carries costs and attracts the attention of rivals. Its assertiveness is prompting adverse reactions of a magnitude that Beijing may not have anticipated. Despite the deep-seated interdependencies and the many issues involving mutual articulation and accommodation, the United States seem definitively committed to China’s neo-containment. Taiwan is more set on preserving its *de facto* independence. Several Southeast Asian countries are increasingly willing to counterbalance Beijing in the South China Sea. After years of strategic ambiguity, India and Australia are aligning in counterbalancing China, as is the case with the Quad or the new AUKUS. Several Asia-Pacific countries are increasing their defense budgets and military modernization programs as a counterweight to China. Many economies around the world are limiting Chinese investments in strategic sectors and looking for ways to reduce dependence on Chinese production and supply chains. The 2021 G7 Summit proposed an alternative initiative to the New China Silk Road driven by the democracies, and the European Union launched the new Global Gateway strategy on 1 December 2021 with an ambitious infrastructure financing plan largely competing with the Chinese BRI.¹⁰⁶ An increasing number of States are advancing in technological decoupling from China and also openly and frontally criticizing certain Beijing policies. The EU-China CAI agreement is frozen, and several CPTPP members

speak out against China's membership. NATO's new strategic concept will, for the first time, include references to China...

Seen from this perspective, the grand strategy of Xi's China seems to have gone too far too fast. China's former overall image of a "benign panda" is being replaced with that of a 'menacing dragon'. Several regions of the globe, from Europe to the South Pacific, Africa, South Asia, Southeast and Eastern America, and Latin America are torn between maintaining and strengthening ties with China and limiting and countering those ties. In an extraordinarily complex, dynamic, coevolving and profoundly changing international system, it is still too early to discern all the impacts of Xi's China's grand strategy, but it is clear that the 21st century world relies heavily on what China wants, does and achieves. Self-assured, Xi Jinping continues to believe that "time and momentum are on China's side."¹⁰⁷ But are they really? **RI**

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ENDNOTES

¹ A Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, No. 71, September 2021.

² With the longest uninterrupted history of a political unity in the world dating back about five thousand years, China is the most populous state in the globe with more than 1440 million inhabitants (18.5% of the world's population), representing the han approximately 95% of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups. The PRC is also one of the largest states in geographical area (third or fourth, depending on what is considered Chinese territory) with at least 9600 million square kilometres, situated between Central Asia and the seas of South and East China, South Asia and Indochina to the Korean Peninsula, with a land border totaling 22 457 km with 14 countries (Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and North Korea) and a coastline of 14,500 km.

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investors and levelling the conditions of competition between foreign companies, Chinese private companies and public companies); or Cryptography Law, adapted in October 2019 and entering into force in 2020, establishing that entities have encryption systems to ensure sufficient security, but without such encryption harming national security or the public good and requiring the State and its agencies to have full access to encryption systems and data protected by those systems.

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