

TO WHAT EXTENT IS CHINA A ‘SECURITY THREAT’?

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The current international order, led by the United States, is undergoing phenomenal political, economic, and security changes that will decide whether the order will continue as it is, or a major pole shift will occur in an increasingly bipolar world. China is at the forefront of this evolution. It is the sole actor threatening the U.S.-led order so that it can be reshaped to fit into a novel design with Chinese characteristics. To do so, China employs a diverse set of economic and political strategies, which are efficient despite their ruthless nature. As of now, it does not look like the U.S. and the international community can form a consensus on how much of a security threat China poses. This issue brief looks at China's rise so far, the nature of this emergence, and attempt to establish China as an unconventional external threat that can spawn internal threats, making it the most consequential security threat to the U.S. and the international community since the fall of the USSR.

Introduction

With the conclusion of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the United States (U.S.) emerged as the dominant force in the global economic, political, and military spheres. This marked the beginning of a new era, with U.S. President George H. W. Bush advocating for the principles of the Western order that had triumphed over the USSR, rebranding it as a ‘liberal international order’.¹ The Cold War-era international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO), along with arms control treaties, were assimilated into what Bush referred to as the ‘new world order’.²

Since then, the liberal international order has propelled the rise of numerous modern-day economic powers. Among them was China, where the Western democracies anticipated that the liberal ideals would be embraced as the country modernized and prospered. However, in a twist of events, China veered off this anticipated

path. As it ascended, it began to challenge the norms established by the West. This unexpected divergence, combined with China's rapid rise, its questionable interpretations of international law, its increasingly ambiguous relations with other autocracies to weaken the liberal international order, and the potential threat it poses to U.S. hegemony in the international order, has led to its actions being viewed with suspicion.

While investigating the extent to which China poses a 'security threat' to the U.S. and the international community, it is vital to understand what constitutes a security threat in this case, because various scholars have offered diverse definitions of a security threat. Barry Buzan, for instance, advocated for a more military-centric outlook of a state's security, where the threat is external, and expressed doubt about the feasibility of systematic conceptualizations of security in the economic and environmental spheres.³ On the other hand, Mohammed Ayoob argued for a broader concept that encompasses not just traditional external military threats but also states' internal dynamics and problems.⁴ The definition of security in this issue brief will be a unique amalgamation of both these approaches.

China's 'peaceful rise or development'

Before delving deeper into the scope of the threat that China poses to the security of the U.S. and the international community, another crucial concept to grasp is the Chinese government's idea of "peaceful development."

Hu Jintao, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2004, amended the Party warhorse Zheng Bijian's phrase of "peaceful rise" (héping juéqǐ) and re-introduced it as China's "peaceful development" (héping fāzhǎn). The change in terminology was a result of continuous disagreement among Chinese government 'workers' and academics amid rising concerns about the term 'rise' being misinterpreted by the international community, further contributing to the growing concept of the "China Threat."⁵

Moving beyond terminologies, both Bijian and Jintao agreed that China would continue to grow, but not in

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a way that may physically harm other nations, and that China would become democratic, but with “Chinese characteristics.”⁶ Bijian put emphasis on China's emergence being driven by capital, technology, and resources.⁷ He also asserted that China would continue to advance peacefully from 2020 to 2050 and its 'peaceful rise' will keep opening up the economy so that it and the international community can mutually benefit rather than China posing a threat to the international community.⁸

The CPC, and especially its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, continue to insist that the 'peaceful development' model has worked and will remain in place in the future.⁹ However, the experiences of China's neighboring sovereign states in the last decade suggest otherwise. Since the early 2010s, China has created a number of artificial islands on several coral reefs in the South China Sea (SCS), a move that irked their maritime neighbors as well as the U.S. The country then escalated matters even further when it started building ports, military facilities and airstrips not only on these newly created islands but also on the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which are claimed by six countries in the SCS region,

including China.¹⁰ In recent years, Chinese coast guard ships have also displayed obstructive naval maneuvers in the SCS against fishing vessels of other nations in the region and, in particular, hostile actions against those of the Philippines.¹¹ In the East China Sea, Chinese vessels occasionally carry out similar but less hostile maneuvers against Japan. Last year, Japanese authorities claimed that Chinese coast guard ships had “violated” their territorial waters around disputed islands in the region.¹² To the southwest, China has locked horns with India, over territorial claims. The two Asian titans even lost soldiers in 2020, after a fatal clash between the Indian Army and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) over setting camps in disputed land.¹³ Since then, the two sides have been in a stalemate, with about 100,000 soldiers between both sides still deployed at the border.

These rather ‘un-peaceful’ moves by Chinese authorities are gradually taking the shape of a threat that needs to be countered or contained, not only for its neighbors but also for the U.S., which has significant maritime interests related to global trade and a few treaty allies in the region.

Bijian’s claim about China’s ascent being driven by capital, technology, and resource acquisition “through peaceful means” cannot be further from the truth. China’s activities in these domains are as invasive as the

cases discussed above, but not as overt. In 2013, President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—an ambitious strategic infrastructure and trade project that links China to the rest of Asia, Russia and Europe by land “corridors” and a “maritime Silk Road” through Asia, Europe and Africa.¹⁴ The BRI was joined by almost 70 countries that have subsequently received loans from China. These investments by China were designed to increase China’s soft power and strengthen its geopolitical strategy as well as diplomatic influence in the host countries.¹⁵

In the particular case of lower-middle-income African, Asian and small island nations, these investments have created more opportunities for China to secure its interests, but at the behest of endangering the host countries’ economies. Prominent examples of such Chinese diplomatic ploys can be seen in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Djibouti to name a few. In all three cases, the host countries have been forced to hand over control of China-funded critical domestic infrastructures such as ports to China because of their inability to repay the loaned amount within the agreed terms. Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port has been leased to China for 99 years and used by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to dock its attack submarines on multiple occasions.¹⁶ Similarly, Pakistan’s Gwadar Port, considered to be a part of the BRI, is operated by the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) and two PLAN warships were recently loaned to Pakistani authorities for port security.¹⁷ Djibouti, with a GDP lower than any African country, at \$3.52 billion in 2022, has become another recipient of China’s loans and debt relief funds to overcome its economic challenges.¹⁸ It now hosts a PLAN base in the Horn of Africa, not just overlooking an important strategic chokepoint and one of the world’s busiest maritime trade routes, but also situated only six miles away from a major U.S. overseas military base.¹⁹ China employs similar tactics to maintain its control over the huge natural resource reserves that African countries hold.²⁰

The field of technology has become yet another battlefield for China, especially to spread its political narratives and mine global user data. President Xi Jinping, at the

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CPC's Party Congress in 2017, publicly announced his plans to elevate China's status to a "cyber superpower" by strategically positioning Chinese technologies in the global market to secure long-term commercial benefits.²¹ One significant example of China's growing influence in the technology domain is the success of the social media sensation TikTok. It came into being in 2017 when Chinese technology giant ByteDance decided to launch a global version of their video-based social media platform called Douyin. Since then, TikTok has risen to become one of the most popular video-based content creation and social media platforms. There are a number of potential security risks associated with TikTok, the first being a direct connection with the Chinese government's overseas influence operations through its domestic companies, the second is the theft of personal data of users and the third is opening the way for malware to sneak into people's personal phones and other devices while downloading the app.²²

The majority of TikTok's audience pool is considered to be individuals born between 1996 and 2010, also known informally as Gen Z, who are the first generation to never even imagine a world without the internet.²³ Gen Z is also the generation where future world leaders will come from. In fact, they are already getting involved in the political debates around the world.²⁴ For China to be able to influence the minds of these individuals through social media or spying on their devices through malware is a grave risk for the future of decision-making bodies all around the world. A Freedom House report says that China is cultivating foreign media elites and ministers to follow its lead on internet policy.²⁵ "Unchecked, the PRC's efforts will reshape the global information landscape, creating biases and gaps that could even lead nations to make decisions that subordinate their economic and security interests to Beijing's," said a U.S. State Department report.²⁶

The 'DragonBear' angle

The ongoing war in Ukraine has reminded the international community that the partnership between the world's two consequential autocracies, China and Russia, is something ominous. Their shared rivalry with the U.S. and everything it stands for make their

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strategic cooperation a vital security matter, not only for the U.S. but also for the international order it helped set up. Chinese President Xi Jinping has called Russian President Vladimir Putin his “best friend and colleague” and got complimented in return as “dear friend,” such is their “no-limits friendship”.²⁷ On top of praising the BRI, Russia continues to align with China in the UN against the U.S. and its allies. In Ukraine, China has been helping Russia not only to withstand the barrage of international sanctions by providing economic support but also to continue its atrocious war against a sovereign nation in the face of a depleting military arsenal.²⁸ Velina Tchakarova describes this relationship as the ‘DragonBear’ arrangement where China with its economic and diplomatic influence, joins hands with militarily experienced Russia to counter U.S. influence in international affairs.²⁹ She rightly points out that Russia has been supplying China with state-of-the-art security systems such as the S-400 air defense system and Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets to boost Beijing's capabilities against U.S. naval vessels in the region. Joint development and technology sharing in defense as well as the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sector are also concerning. But she warns the U.S. and its allies against looking at the ‘DragonBear’ question with the established understanding of “a classic alliance” based on “Western ideas and concepts,” because the two autocracies are “not always with each other,

but never against each other.”³⁰ Tchakarova excellently sums up the nature of the ‘DragonBear’ relationship:

“The ‘DragonBear’ is neither an alliance or an entente nor a “marriage of convenience”, but a temporary asymmetrical relationship, in which China predominantly sets the tone but remains dependent on Russia in many ways Given the critical uncertainties and unpredictable course of Russia’s war against Ukraine, Putin may turn the country into a global mercenary for China’s geoeconomic interests due to increasing dependencies on the ‘DragonBear’.”³¹

China as a Security Threat?

John Mearsheimer predicted that China’s rise would not be peaceful and would someday present a threat to the international system.³² Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Susan Shirk, in *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*, explains why China’s neighbors and the U.S., in particular, now see China’s rise as anything but peaceful.³³ She argues that China, under President Xi Jinping and with his assertive foreign policy to boost support at home, needs to be regarded as the gravest threat to the international community. China’s territorial disputes and complete disregard for the sovereignty of its neighbors and other states, its increasingly belligerent attitude towards international norms, complemented by its gradual dominance in international forums, and its multidimensional cooperation with Russia against the U.S., presents it as an existential security threat to the current international order. If not contained, a ‘new world order’ will soon emerge, with authoritarian China as the sole global hegemon, where it dictates the rules of a rules-based international order.

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