The Malign Influence of the People’s Republic of China in International Affairs

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The People’s Republic of China (PRC) continues to aggressively seek a return to international prominence and has increasingly amplified its presence as a global power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made it abundantly clear that it has plans to reshape the world order more to Beijing’s liking. Within the Indo-Pacific, the PRC has strategically crafted its international policies through its signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to gain advantage and leverage Beijing’s growing economic and military might. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, President Xi Jinping’s vision includes “creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia.”

Through this framework, four observable tactics have emerged: the use of debt diplomacy, border disputes with neighboring nations, the general disregard for agreements and international norms, and, more recently, Beijing’s undermining actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguably, an objective observer could consider the PRC’s international policies to be subversive and, at a bare minimum, have the potential to impact the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Debt Diplomacy

One international policy the PRC has made a habit of utilizing is the practice of its debt-trap diplomacy. This occurs when the PRC loans huge sums of money to developing countries, subsequently rendering them vulnerable to the PRC’s influence and underlying intentions to gain economic or political collateral. The term debt-trap diplomacy was originally coined by Professor Brahma Chellaney in 2017 for the Canberra-based nonpartisan think tank Australian Strategic Policy Institute. The data in figure 1 is from research conducted in June 2019 by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy and depicts countries that are in debt to the PRC. It is clear that within the Indo-Pacific, countries that are in China’s immediate proximity and/or those with weaker economies are the most indebted to the PRC. In Pres. Joe Biden’s recently released Interim National Secu-
rity Strategic Guidance, he calls out some of the tactics that China applies when he states: “In many areas, China’s leaders seek unfair advantages, behave aggressively and coercively, and undermine the rules and values at the heart of an open and stable international system. When the Chinese government’s behavior directly threatens our interests and values, we will answer Beijing’s challenge.”

This Chinese behavior has drawn the ire of the international community, as the PRC seeks to subvert the stability of the region, particularly when practicing this diplomacy in nations such as Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste. The fear is that Beijing is taking incremental steps to establish an economic world order dominated by China.

Figure 1. External debt to the PRC

There are numerous examples of the PRC’s debt-trap diplomacy tactics throughout the Indo-Pacific dating to far before the term was coined. The PRC utilized this approach in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War, which ended in 2009. Beijing saw an opportunity to plant imperialistic roots in South Asia, leveraging Sri Lanka’s need to rebuild and providing the country with loans for “projects in and around the capital of Colombo but also a now-notorious grouping in [then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s] hometown of Hambantota. Home to only 40,000 people, Hambantota managed to draw over $1 billion in loans from China Exim for a new deepwater seaport, airport, and cricket stadium.”

Due to Sri Lanka’s inability to repay these exploitative loans, the government in Colombo was forced to lease the strategic Hambantota Port to Beijing for a period of 99 years, enabling the PRC to operate the port au-
tonomously. While these infrastructure projects do boost the local economy, according to Professor Chellaney, the main motive for the PRC is “not to support the local economy, but to facilitate Chinese access to natural resources, or to open the market for low-cost and shoddy Chinese goods.”

The PRC is not sparing Oceania from its debt-trap diplomacy. The tactic is in its initial stages with the Solomon Islands, as the country recently severed its relationship with Taiwan and established allegiance to the PRC. Shortly thereafter, reports emerged of the PRC actively pursuing a “75-year lease for Tulagi, a small island that was the capital of the Solomon Islands in colonial times, along with the construction of an oil and gas terminal, a fishing harbor, and a “special economic zone.” If the PRC follows the same blueprint used in Sri Lanka, the Solomon Islands may relinquish control of a major asset to the PRC’s benefit. The Solomon Islands falling into the hands of the PRC is another step toward realizing Beijing’s vision for a “New Silk Road” as part of the BRI, granting the PRC a major presence in Oceania.

The promise of significant funding to help build much-needed infrastructure may prove too tempting an offer for developing nations to turn down. In 2002, the PRC moved quickly to establish diplomatic relations after Timor-Leste gained its independence from Indonesia. Since that time, the PRC has funded several major construction projects in the country, including the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. The PRC’s interest in Timor-Leste is noteworthy due to the nearby resource-rich Timor Sea. Should Timor-Leste fall prey to the PRC’s debt-trap diplomacy, Beijing will likely exploit the Timor Sea and its bountiful resources as payment in kind. This would raise alarm bells in Australia and the United States, as both nations were instrumental in restoring the island’s independence. There have even been insinuations that the PRC is seeking to establish a naval base in Vanuatu. The Lowy Institute, an independent, nonpartisan international policy think tank based out of Sydney, Australia, has noted, “The most troubling implication for Australian interests is that a future naval or air base in Vanuatu would give China a foothold for operations to coerce Australia, outflank the US and its base on US territory at Guam, and collect intelligence in a regional security crisis.”

One of the most troubling aspects of these loans is their lack of transparency, coupled with other hidden risks that usually accompany their signing. The Harvard Business Review raised this concern, comparing the PRC’s lending practices with those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF): “IMF lending is transparent, and it is usually conditioned on a plan to improve national policies. This is not necessarily the case for Chinese lending, which gives rise to important questions of creditor seniority.” The loans and debts that the PRC takes on
are part of a sustained effort to further the BRI and expand its global reach, and the lack of transparency in these dealings is a reoccurring theme when it comes to Beijing’s policies.

**Border Disputes**

Another nefarious stratagem the PRC has demonstrated in recent years is its blatant disregard for international law on the matter of borders. The PRC has border disputes with more than 10 countries, but what most frequently grabs global attention is Beijing’s disputes in the South China Sea, where its unilateral actions run afoul of multiple claimants. Additionally, China has taken control of some of the territory claimed by India along their shared border, which has become contentious for obvious reasons. These instances further validate the narrative that the PRC seeks to reshape the world into its own image.

The PRC continues to act aggressively and make illegal claims on disputed territory, such as its “Nine-Dash Line” depicted in figure 2. Even after the unanimous ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the 2016 *Philippines v. China* South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal, China asserts that it has indisputable sovereignty over the ocean, islands, and reefs within this fabricated territorial claim. Rather than adhering to the ruling of the tribunal, which decided against Beijing’s designs, the PRC has instead created artificial islands and claimed them as sovereign territory, all while building military outposts and increasing China’s coercive activities in the South China Sea.

Figure 2 also depicts the intersecting national maritime claims in the hotly-contested South China Sea. The PRC’s claim does not line up with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ruling, but countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are unable to counter the PRC’s activities in the area—mostly because of their reliance on and debt to the PRC. In a press statement from the Honorable Michael R. Pompeo, then–Secretary of State, released in July 2020:

> The world will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire. America stands with our Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law. We stand with the international community in defense of freedom of the seas and respect for sovereignty and reject any push to impose ‘might makes right’ in the South China Sea or the wider region.\(^{11}\)
Many of China’s maritime disputes centre on maritime rights, especially claims to exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and continental shelves, involving questions not of sovereignty but of jurisdiction — whether states have the right to exploit resources (oil, gas, minerals, fish).

These are complicated issues because United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is open to interpretation on overlapping claims to sea territory, islands, and EEZs.

Figure 2. PRC and South China Sea claims

CHINA’S AIR DEFENSE IDENTIFICATION ZONE
In November 2013 China announced an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, including air space claimed by Japan and Taiwan.

SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS
These tiny, barren islands are claimed by Japan, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan). The United States transferred administrative control of the islands to Japan in 1972.

EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE
An exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extends 200 nautical miles from a nation’s coastline. Prescribed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the zone acknowledges special rights afforded to that state regarding the exploration and use of marine resources.

SCARBOROUGH SHOAL
This Reef is claimed by both Philippines and China. Since a standoff in 2012 Chinese vessels have de facto controlled the waters around the reef.

SPRATLY ISLANDS
Vietnam, China and Taiwan each claim sovereignty over all the Spratlys’ three 230 features. The Philippines claims 53 features and Malaysia claims 12. Vietnam occupies 27 features, the most of any claimant.

Occupied Features:
- China - 8
- Philippines - 7
- Malaysia - 5
- Taiwan - 1
(the largest island in the Spratlys).

THE NINE-DASHED LINE
China has not clarified in which precise area it thinks it has maritime rights. In a submission to the United Nations in 2009 it included a map with a vaguely defined ‘nine-dashed line’.

The U-shaped area marked by the dashes comprises most of the South China Sea and overlaps the legitimate EEZ and continental shelf claims of other coastal states.

PARACEL ISLANDS
China, Taiwan and Vietnam each claim sovereignty of the Paracel Islands, which China has controlled completely since 1974.

(Source: Lowy Institute)
China’s false border claims have occurred on land as well as at sea. In South Asia, troops from India and China have clashed due to claims along the undemarcated border known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The area near India’s Ladakh union territory is not clearly demarcated, hence Beijing and New Delhi have different views on where the border should be. Any change such as a road construction is perceived as a threat to the status quo in the area that can and has led to bloodshed, including clashes in the Galwan Valley in summer 2020. ADM John Aquilino stated before members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that: “The mistrust between China and India is at an all-time high. In addition to the rupture of bilateral relations as a result of the LAC skirmish, India is deeply suspicious of Chinese activities as part of the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative.”

On the other hand, the relationship between India and the United States has only grown closer and strengthened the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Democratic like-minded nations are recognizing the PRC’s attempts to intimidate its neighbors as the truly duplicitous behavior that it is.

The examples within the South China Sea and along the Indian border are merely two of many that depict the PRC’s general contempt toward dealings with neighboring countries and competing nations alike. The PRC shows its philosophy of “might makes right” in each of these instances. As Arthur Waldron writes for the ORF Issue Brief: “Today it is clear that China intends to use extant international laws to serve its own interests when possible, to ignore them otherwise, and ultimately, change them to suit its own norms.”

Representatives of the PRC may speak about a desire to share and contribute to the international community, but their actions prove them to be an outlier within that community.

### Disregard for Agreements/International Norms

The PRC has relentlessly demonstrated an attitude of disregard, or indifference, which has bled into seemingly every aspect of its global operations. Some of the more egregious offenses include normalizing the theft of technology and intellectual property and the interference with democracy in Hong Kong. In both instances, the PRC shows that its true goal is the perseverance of the CCP at any and all costs.

The United States has witnessed a pattern of intellectual property theft from the PRC in recent years. According to John Demers, the head of the National Security Division at the Department of Justice, “China’s typical *modus operandi* is to steal American IP, replicate it, replace the US company originating that IP in the Chinese domestic market, then displace the United States in the global market.” The PRC has been getting away with this for years and has been persistent in its efforts to obtain intellectual property and intelligence.
hard pressed to find exact figures on the number of cases of economic espionage, but “China remains the world’s principal IP [intellectual property] infringer across all types of IP theft, according to a spokesman for the IP Commission, which estimates up [to] $600 billion annually in cost to the U.S. economy from these actions.” The Department of Justice has been forced to increase the number of prosecutors to handle these cases related to economic espionage, and the PRC’s disregard for intellectual property rights has not ceased.

Beijing has also shown complete disregard for the citizens of Hong Kong and the promise to allow Hong Kong its political independence for a period of 50 years, ending only in 2047. The PRC continues to subvert democracy in Hong Kong at every opportunity. The PRC’s meddling in Hong Kong demonstrates a practiced art of contempt for previous agreements and for democracy as a whole. Hong Kong is considered a Special Administrative Region to the PRC, but the established policy was for “one country, two systems.” Under that model, Hong Kong would maintain its capitalist system, political autonomy, and cultural way of life for the 50 years following the return to Chinese rule in 1997. Since that time, US policy has been to promote Hong Kong’s autonomy, prosperity, and way of life. Much of the PRC’s influence and actions in Hong Kong stand in direct opposition to the 1997 agreement, as Beijing has been slowly eroding Hong Kong’s promised freedoms. Reports point to the prosecution of protest leaders, increased media censorship, and human rights violations within Hong Kong. Just last year, the US government determined that there was no longer sufficient evidence Hong Kong was autonomous from the PRC and, thus, “suspended or eliminated special and differential treatment for Hong Kong, including with respect to export controls; imports; immigration; the extradition and transfer of sentenced persons; training for law enforcement and security services; shipping tax; and cultural exchange programs.” The PRC has continued to up the ante by ignoring, if not outright dismissing, Hong Kong’s political autonomy. Very recently the PRC approved a reform of Hong Kong’s electoral system, allowing the CCP to appoint more of Hong Kong’s lawmakers. One can imagine that these pro-Beijing acolytes will further usher in the erosion of any democratic principles or freedoms that remain in the city. This complicated history and ever-evolving policy serves as another example of the PRC “shifting the goal posts” when it comes to its attitude and behavior regarding established rules or norms within the international community.

These cases illustrate the lengths that the PRC is willing to traverse to advance its own unilateral strategic goals. The PRC continues to outright reject international laws relating to intellectual property rights and seeks to gain information and technology by any means necessary. Furthermore, Beijing’s actions in Hong Kong emphasize its concern that “permitting political freedom would jeopardize
the CCP’s grasp on power.” Each of these issues can be connected to the PRC’s intent to establish itself as the predominant global power and the CCP’s exhaustive efforts to serve its own authoritative ambitions.

COVID-19

COVID-19 provided the PRC an opportunity to exhibit its disconcerting motivations to the international community once again. In December 2019, reports of an outbreak originating in Wuhan Province surfaced resulting in the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring that the novel coronavirus is “a public health emergency of international concern, WHO’s highest level of alarm.” The PRC immediately went on a full-blown disinformation and misinformation campaign to win public opinion and shape the narrative. Beijing portrayed the PRC’s efforts in handling the pandemic as proven and effective, giving the impression that China is ready to aid countries struggling to contain the virus. However, a closer look at the actions and policies, such as the dispersal of personal protective equipment, apparent human rights violations, and vaccine practices depict rather different underlying motivations.

Coupled with the information operations campaign, at the beginning of the pandemic, the PRC’s aggressive approach came in the form of “mask diplomacy,” through which Beijing provided much-needed, yet substandard, personal protective equipment (PPE). This was an attempt to influence the information domain by painting Beijing in a positive light. As Helena Legarda, senior analyst for MERICS, a top European think tank on China, writes, “Beijing’s donations were meant to change the COVID-19 narrative by garnering positive international media attention and praise for China’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak, thus bolstering Beijing’s self-styled image as a responsible global power.” However, countries began to call attention to the poor quality of PRC-made masks and testing kits and even halted shipments. Several nations noted that the masks did not fit, the filters were defective, and the testing kits could not accurately determine if individuals had the virus. To counter the negative press, PRC diplomats stated that these defective supplies were from a company not licensed to sell its products. This negative attention was only amplified, however, when reports leaked about Uighur labor being used to satisfy the increased domestic and global demands for PPE production.
The PRC has persecuted the Uighurs, a minority Muslim group concentrated in the northwestern portion of the country, for years. Multiple human rights violations have been highlighted: population control, forced labor, internment in government re-education camps, and violations of religious freedom. The PRC claimed that Beijing’s policies toward the Uighur minority is part of an overall poverty reduction program. In 2015, President Xi identified risk prevention, pollution control, and antipoverty as the CCP’s top priorities for 2017–2020. The antipoverty program targeted poor provinces such as Xinjiang, where Uighurs are considered natives. To ensure the impression of progress on this poverty reduction program, provinces utilized these impoverished citizens as forced labor, decreasing their poverty numbers and reporting the distorted numbers to Beijing. Furthermore, the PRC dispatched the People’s Liberation Army to strategically export the high-valued and coveted, yet ineffective, PPE via military aircraft to developing countries. Other nations, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, sent their C-130 aircraft to the PRC to procure medical supplies during the initial response to the pandemic. Alibaba cofounder and former chief executive officer, Jack Ma, donated PPE throughout the year and has so far donated to 150 countries while remaining within the PRC’s guidelines. His striking absence for a period piqued the interest of news media outlets after he made statements countering the CCP narrative. It is unlikely the PRC would reveal where he was for
the nearly three-month span, but the fact that this vanishing act occurred shortly after speaking in contradiction of Beijing’s rhetoric is telling, underscoring the continued lack of transparency witnessed from the CCP.

Figure 4. Nations where PRC COVID-19 vaccines are being tested

Fast-forward to the end of 2020: the finish line for a COVID-19 vaccine race was in sight, and the PRC and the United States were in the lead. The PRC began to conduct trials in 15 countries to solidify relationships with historically neutral nations. However, concerns regarding the PRC vaccine began to emerge. The Chinese trials were only conducted outside of the PRC, leading countries to question the rationale behind such testing. Another concern is the long-term reliance on the PRC for additional dosages and the unknown strings attached for obtaining the vaccine. According to the Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, this is “raising new
concerns about debt entrapment and medical ethics. Some analysts contend that it’s another PRC effort to influence and control countries through unviable infrastructure loans.” It is no surprise that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is likely to be dependent on the PRC vaccine to curb the virus. More recently, questions arose about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccine, as the PRC continues to withhold information about its vaccine trials. The PRC has a history of producing substandard vaccines that have resulted in mass protests domestically. The company responsible for those earlier vaccines is the same one now producing the Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine, which is undergoing Phase 3 clinical trials in seven countries.

The PRC’s standard lack of transparency has been observed from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the disinformation campaign sought to conceal vital information and deflect blame. This is highlighted in a report from the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs: “By responding in a transparent and responsible manner, the PRC could have supported the global public health response and shared information with the world about how to handle the virus. It is likely the ongoing pandemic could have been prevented had they done so, saving hundreds of thousands of lives and the world from an economic meltdown.” The damages caused by the attempts to hide the outbreak were compounded by the dispersal of ineffective PPE, subsequent human rights violations, and concerns of the vaccine efficacy. The PRC’s actions following the COVID-19 outbreak are just additional instances of acting solely out of self-interest, much to the detriment of surrounding nations in the Indo-Pacific and in the international community writ large.

**Conclusion**

If left unchallenged, the PRC will continue its push for greater influence. In the Indo-Pacific, the threat of the PRC controlling global trade through the South China Sea will likely become a reality in the near future, with nearby countries unable to counter Beijing. Additionally, due to the PRC’s control, ports and airfields funded by PRC loans can easily be repurposed for military operations, ultimately destabilizing regional security. In the recently declassified *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, several national objectives are spelled out vis-a-vis the PRC, such as preventing its industrial policies and unfair trading practices, maintaining a US intelligence advantage, and promoting democracy and the rule of law throughout the region. Furthermore, this document spelled out the need to deter the PRC from using military force against the United States and its allies and partners. To best accomplish this objective, the United States must ensure that it enhances “combat-credible U.S. military presence and posture in the Indo-
Pacific region."\(^{31}\) We have witnessed the modernization and advancement of the PRC’s military capabilities at an alarming rate. The United States needs to continue developing capabilities and concepts to maintain its competitive advantage. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen C.Q. Brown, spelled out the necessity for this in his *Accelerate Change or Lose* white paper. Some long-held assumptions of our military advantages, such as air superiority, are no longer assured. As stated in the 2019 *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, “China is investing in a broad range of military programs and weapons, including those designed to improve power projection; modernize its nuclear forces; and conduct increasingly complex operations in domains such as cyberspace, space, and electronic warfare operations. China is also developing a wide array of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which could be used to prevent countries from operating in areas near China’s periphery, including the maritime and air domains that are open to use by all countries.”\(^{32}\) There are both near-term and long-term implications of the PRC’s actions throughout the region that touch upon all instruments of power. We must be prepared to stand up for US values and ideals when confronting the PRC’s influence diplomatically, informationally, militarily, and economically.

The combination of the PRC’s alarming advancement in military capability and the generally malign nature of Beijing’s policies within the global community highlights the absolute necessity to maintain US competitive advantage against near-peer adversaries. The PRC’s debt-trap diplomacy is a coercive economic practice that can cripple smaller nations. Although at first glance the PRC’s willingness to assist may be perceived as a neighborly act, this assistance habitually comes with strings attached.\(^{33}\) The PRC continues to challenge and test the agreements and norms that are foundational to the international order. Beijing’s claims within the South China Sea and along the Indian border, the reneging of promised rights in Hong Kong, and China’s outright theft of technology and intellectual property demonstrate a disturbing disregard for the rule of law and international standards. Again, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, the CCP showed its self-serving attitude when attempting to deflect responsibility through a global disinformation campaign. Any one of these issues or practices is enough to raise concern, and all the more so when looked upon from a broader scope. As a one-party centralized state, every one of the PRC’s actions is intimately linked with Beijing’s overall goal to create a Sino-centric international order.

A free and open Indo-Pacific is unlikely to prevail if the PRC’s actions are left unchecked. As such, any arrangements with the PRC must be evaluated thoroughly and with these considerations in mind. The goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific is a region free of coercion and predatory practices and open for all nations to operate as dictated by international law. Peace in the Indo-Pacific is made
possible by the willingness of like-minded nations to work together coupled with
the military power of allies and partners postured within the region. The United
States must continue to work closely with its allies and partners to improve mili-
tary interoperability and enhance collective deterrence capability. In President
Biden’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, he states: “Our democratic
alliances enable us to present a common front, produce a unified vision, and pool
our strength to promote high standards, establish effective international rules, and
hold countries like China to account.” It is not a coincidence that the United
States is already the partner and ally of choice within the region, while the PRC
is struggling to gain similar influence; however, the PRC believes global power is
a zero-sum game. One country must win, and every other country must lose. The
PRC’s goal is an Indo-Pacific centered on Beijing and solely based on what is best
for the CCP. The debt-trap diplomacy, border disputes, nefarious practices such as
the theft of technology and reneging of agreements, as well as the PRC’s actions
surrounding COVID demonstrate that the PRC has and will continue to operate
outside of the rule of international law and standards to achieve its goals.

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Notes


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33. For particulars on such agreements, see: Anna Gelpern, et al., How China Lends: A Rare Look into 100 Debt Contracts with Foreign Governments (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, March 2021), https://www.cgdev.org/. The research team for this important study provide a dataset of the loans here: https://www.aiddata.org/.