Irregular Influence

Combating Malign Chinese Communist Party Actions in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

As the United States seeks to reorient its foreign policy to effectively compete with China, it must gain a profound understanding of China's ambitions. Uncovering the historical roots and driving forces behind Chinese actions is crucial for comprehending the underlying motivations fueling these ambitions. This research scrutinizes the global ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and assesses the strategic means by which it seeks to realize them. It critically examines the CCP’s pursuit of global hegemony and outlines its strategy, with a particular focus on its regional ambitions in Southeast Asia. Emphasis is placed on the CCP’s utilization of malign influence as a tool to achieve its objectives while carefully avoiding actions that might provoke a military response from the United States. This research is relevant to foreign relations experts and the operational military force alike.1

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China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), constitutes an amalgamation of Confucian and Marxist-Leninist authoritarian ideologies, drawing significantly from its more recent Maoist history in shaping its approach to “struggle.”2 Chinese President Xi Jinping has revived the Maoist adage celebrating “the rise of the East and the decline of the West” as a reflection of shifting dynamics in the world order.3

The CCP actively employs unrestricted warfare tactics in Southeast Asia to achieve its regional objectives, thereby advancing its broader global ambitions with

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1 This article is the first in a two-part series and will focus on the “problem.” It presents a strategic estimate of China’s application of influence in Southeast Asia as it relates to competition with the United States. The material serves as a basis for understanding the threat to US interests, the roots that fuel the competition, China’s frame, narrative, and strategy, as well as the current US perception and response. Part two of the series will address the estimate and present a course of action for the US government to address and deter CCP actions in Southeast Asia that impede US strategic objectives. It will detail a phased strategy to address the threat, as analyzed in the strategic estimate, as well as the legal authorities, assumptions, risk assessment, and mitigation measures pertaining to this strategy.


the aim of reorienting the prevailing world order to one centered on Beijing. The CCP adopts a nuanced strategy of irregular warfare (IW), skillfully exploiting the intersection of political warfare and influence to attain its goals while meticulously avoiding actions that could trigger a military response from the United States. This strategy subverts traditional forms of benign statecraft, such as diplomacy, by weaponizing them as instruments of IW.4

The CCP executes a sophisticated and deliberate plan that concurrently leverages all elements of power to operationalize the means required to achieve its desired end-state. In Southeast Asia, the constituent objectives converge on the reunification of Taiwan. The security of both the CCP and China itself is fundamental to and intertwined with this objective. Beijing is in the process of implementing a strategy aimed at creating conditions conducive to a forceful reunification of Taiwan, if necessary. This entails securing access to vital resources, establishing institutionalized supply lines, and exporting Chinese influence. Southeast Asia emerges as the pivotal region in ensuring the successful reunification, serving as the initial domino in a broader plan for regional and ultimately global hegemony.5

The desires of the CCP are in direct contrast to US regional objectives and impede its capacity to project military power to counter China’s ambitions. Without a revamped US strategy for confronting China, both the freedom of movement in the Pacific and US strategic interests will face significant ramifications.

Roots of the Conflict

China’s Historical Consciousness

The phrase *wuwang guochi* (勿忘国耻), translating to “never forget national humiliation,” holds a central place in CCP narratives and is deeply ingrained in the contemporary Chinese psyche.6 This narrative is predicated on the framing of the “Century of Humiliation,” spanning the years from 1839 to 1949 when China’s

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government lost control over substantial portions of its traditional territory to foreign powers.\textsuperscript{7}

This period commenced in 1839 when British gunboats ascended the Yangtze River, compelling China’s leadership to open its ports to the opium trade, thus instigating the First Opium War.\textsuperscript{8} Subsequently, the Boxer Rebellion aimed to expel foreigners from China but ultimately failed, culminating in the Boxer Protocol. This accord effectively partitioned control of China among an eight-nation alliance comprising Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary.\textsuperscript{9} This agreement subjected China to foreign influence and obligated it to pay substantial reparations. Japan also brutally invaded China, culminating in World War II. Additionally, China experienced intermittent internal strife, infighting, and rebellions, which further compounded its challenges.

The period ended when the CCP, led by Mao Zedong, emerged victorious in the Chinese civil war, establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.\textsuperscript{10} The consolidation of power by the PRC forced the Kuomintang (KMT) to retreat to Taiwan, setting the stage for the ongoing power struggle known as the “Taiwan question.” The imperative of achieving the reunification of Taiwan remains a paramount objective for the CCP, as underscored in official speeches and engagements.\textsuperscript{11} Deep-seated beliefs regarding the century of humiliation and the reunification of Taiwan serve to solidify the CCP’s legitimacy and signify the rectification of a lingering historical injustice. Taiwan’s reunification arguably stands as the sole nonnegotiable vestige of that era.\textsuperscript{12}

An examination of this historical context is essential for comprehending the Chinese psyche and the narrative employed by the CCP to foster nationalism and solidify its legitimacy. The national trauma associated with the century of humiliation can be likened to the American sentiment following the events of 11 September 2001.\textsuperscript{13} Although many Americans did not directly experience this event, subsequent generations are likely to connect with it through media and storytell-

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{8} Kaufman, “The ‘Century of Humiliation’ and China’s National Narratives,” 2.
    \item \textsuperscript{10} Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 84.
    \item \textsuperscript{11} Xi Jinping, Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects, Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Beijing, China, October 16, 2022), 4.
    \item \textsuperscript{12} Kaufman, “The ‘Century of Humiliation’ and China’s National Narratives,” 1.
    \item \textsuperscript{13} Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 3.
\end{itemize}
ing. In contemporary China, the four Chinese characters 勿忘国耻 have acquired symbolic significance and are enshrined in nationalistic pledges and educational materials for the youth. This is complemented by the CCP’s construction and renovation of more than 10,000 memorial sites since 1991, serving to amplify patriotism.\textsuperscript{14}

**Distrust of the Liberal Order**

The CCP harbors deep distrust toward the current organization of the liberal international order. This sentiment primarily stems from the century of humiliation and the perception that China was exploited for the benefit of the West. Many in China regard the Western-led liberal order as an ill-fitting “suit,” considering it a relic of the nineteenth century that retains its combative nature and has essentially remained unaltered since its inception.\textsuperscript{15} They see it as a Western-created relic of the nineteenth century that is combative in nature and has remained essentially unchanged since its inception. According to this worldview, the present international order is a rigged system designed to uphold the existing status quo.

Beijing identifies the United States as the current global hegemon and the principal beneficiary in perpetuating the status quo. Consequently, this aligns the United States and, by extension, the West, with the prevailing system. China’s concern with this status quo is profound, driven by the belief that the system comprises both strong and weak nation-states competing for dominance. However, those with the greatest power, such as the United States, can control outcomes in their favor.\textsuperscript{16} China’s mistrust of the current world order, coupled with its perception of vulnerability, fuels the CCP’s imperative to reshape the existing international order in its favor.\textsuperscript{17}

Ironically, China has prospered within the confines of the current international order. It has transformed itself from a divided, developing state into the world’s second-largest economy, poised to become the largest by some measures in the coming years.\textsuperscript{18} In 1971, China secured a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council, replacing Taiwan, which held the legacy China seat, and has assumed global leadership roles with Chinese officials leading four of the fifteen

\textsuperscript{17} Kaufman, “The ‘Century of Humiliation’ and China’s National Narratives,” 7.
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UN specialized agencies. This complexity underscores China's intricate relationship with the existing liberal order.

Despite apparent benefits, China has consistently stressed the need to reform the current international order. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), previously known as the Shanghai Five, frequently employs phrases such as multipolarity and democratizing international relations in its messaging. In 1997, China, along with Russia, issued a joint declaration “a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order.” Subsequently, China has adopted a more assertive approach to international security strategy.

The emphasis on the necessity of a multipolar world may be indicative of future CCP ambitions. Some argue that China seeks a flexible, partial, and adaptable multipolar system that allows it to amass influence before overtly consolidating hegemony, initially at the regional and then global levels. This aligns with China's approach to IW. Although former President Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 statement advocating for China to “hide its strength, bide its time, and never take the lead” has evolved under President Xi, the tactic of waiting for the opportune moment remains relevant. Consequently, an analysis of CCP messaging regarding its world order preferences and its actions reveals inconsistencies that the party has not addressed.

Chinese Exceptionalism

The concept of Chinese exceptionalism closely parallels that of US exceptionalism. It serves as a framework for understanding China's behavior in international politics, rooted in the perception that China is inherently “good” and “different.” This notion plays a pivotal role in CCP strategy, linking Chinese nationalism and narratives to a growing sense of manifest destiny on the global stage.

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Xi assumed power in 2012 and guided China toward an expanding global influence. The rise of antiglobalist populism that brought President Donald Trump to the White House resulted in a temporary decline in US global leadership, which Xi promptly leveraged. Substantial gains achieved within a relatively short time-frame fueled a sense of destiny.

At this juncture, the concept of time becomes significant. Prolonged success tends to breed expectations of continued success—a fallacy that exceptionalism can perpetuate. Another pitfall lies in the heightened boldness and risk-taking inherent in decision making. Xi’s newfound assertiveness has led to an increase in chauvinism within the CCP. China has actively sought to remove any mention of universal human rights from UN resolutions and has initiated the creation of China-centric international organizations, challenging those established by the West, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the SCO.

In his address to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi explicitly expressed his intent to assume a more decisive global role and criticized what he termed as “hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts of using strength to intimidate the weak.” This increasingly audacious critique of global norms signals a more proactive Beijing strategy under Xi.

Xi believes that China has entered a strategic opportunity phase, even though this specific term was omitted from the 20th Party Congress report. It remains pertinent to strategic assessment. The 2022 US National Security Strategy (NSS) designates China as the primary competitor, aligning with recent US efforts to address the competition with China. Xi likely perceives a narrowing window to secure China’s ascent now that the US has focused its efforts on addressing the China challenge. The concept of tianxia (天下, “all-under-heaven”) presents an area where Chinese exceptionalism may foster expansionism or at least increased influence beyond traditional Chinese territorial boundaries, potentially broadening China’s reach.

Tianxia operates on a civilizational rather than a nation-state basis. This means that the idea of Chinese Confucian cultural universalism can be exported to the extensive Chinese diaspora worldwide. The tianxia system prioritizes soft power.

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28 Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 42.
elements such as culture, morality, and harmony over a military role in maintaining order. Central to *tianxia* is the belief that China is the sole true civilization, possessing unchallenged cultural superiority that is exportable and capable of assimilating outsiders. These drivers of exceptionalism are discernible in Xi’s official statements and underlie the CCP’s influence strategy.\(^{32}\)

**Lessons Observed and Lessons Endured**

China’s perspective on competition with the United States has been significantly influenced by what Rush Doshi refers to as the “traumatic trifecta.” This trifecta encompasses the events of Tiananmen Square (1989), the Gulf War (1990–1991), and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). These events intensified Beijing’s concerns about the United States and instigated fundamental shifts in its perception of contemporary warfare.\(^{33}\)

The Tiananmen Square incident solidified the imperative of safeguarding the CCP as the guardians of greater China. Xi emphasizes that the unraveling of a regime often commences with a threatening ideological spark.\(^{34}\) Tiananmen Square provided the CCP with firsthand insight into how rapidly anti-authoritarian sentiment can propagate and the threats it poses to the party.

The Gulf War served as a lesson in US military supremacy. Highly coordinated operations executed at a rapid tempo, combined with technological superiority, resulted in an unexpectedly swift victory. China acknowledged this conflict as a notable shift in the character and pace of warfare. In response, China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) conducted a series of studies to analyze the conflict and formulate a strategy to counter the superior military capabilities witnessed in Iraq.\(^{35}\) To offset this military advantage, the CCP adopted the aforementioned strategy of unrestricted warfare, showcasing China’s preferred method of warfare by shaping desired outcomes and deceptively establishing conditions that favor future conflicts while avoiding provocations that might trigger a US military response.

The final major lesson shaping CCP strategy and its present actions was the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Beijing observed the fall of an authoritarian communist regime that had previously served as a mentor. The regime’s collapse also destabilized China’s northern border, necessitating a renewed regional focus. During this period, Chinese scholarly articles on “China Threat Theory” surged,

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\(^{32}\) Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 42.
\(^{33}\) Doshi, *The Long Game*, 47.
\(^{35}\) Doshi, *The Long Game*, 75.
coinciding with work on multilateralism.\textsuperscript{36} The CCP keenly felt the ability of the US hegemon to extend its influence into its backyard, compelling Beijing to develop a strategy to counteract this threat.

The perceived ideological threat posed by liberal ideals, evident in both the events of Tiananmen Square and the Soviet Union’s demise, prompted the CCP to initiate the United Front initiative. This initiative seeks to eliminate internal and external adversaries by forging ambitious alliances and partnerships in a common struggle against tyranny, both domestically and internationally. Its application involves eliminating divisions within and rallying opponents to resist US hegemony. A more detailed analysis of this initiative will follow in the subsequent threat strategy. For now, it is sufficient to note that Beijing’s assessment of US strengths and the perceived threat it poses drive the CCP’s strategy of contention. Southeast Asia has emerged as a pivotal battleground in this contest.

The CCP perceives Southeast Asia as the arena for extending its regional influence and establishing a buffer zone between mainland China and the United States, thereby extending its security perimeter beyond the first island chain. East Asian countries, notably Japan, lie firmly within the sphere of US influence, making Southeast Asia a more feasible target. Additionally, Southeast Asia’s geography plays to the CCP’s advantage. Dominating access to the South China Sea is more attainable than controlling the open ocean to the east, rendering Southeast Asia pivotal in controlling entry to the region. Lastly, Southeast Asia provides the CCP with the opportunity to set conditions for a forceful reunification of Taiwan, representing the initial step toward regional hegemony.

\textbf{Frames and Narrative}

The frames through which the CCP perceives the world and constructs its narrative are closely linked to the previously outlined historical roots. The CCP’s collective memory, marked by its trials and lessons drawn from encounters with the United States, threads its way through the narrative. In this research, China’s government is intentionally referred to as the CCP rather than the PRC or the Chinese people. This choice reflects the party’s absolute control and the repressive practices associated with authoritarian governance. While CCP propaganda exerts a significant influence on the Chinese population, it would be inaccurate to assert

\textsuperscript{36} Doshi, \textit{The Long Game}, 107.
that CCP actions represent the broader Chinese populace, notwithstanding the CCP’s claim to speak for the “Chinese people,” both within China and abroad.  

Diagnostic Frame

The CCP directs attention to perceived historical injustices, using them as a catalyst to amplify supposed injustices in the modern world. Beijing harnesses the century of humiliation as the foundation for portraying Western bullying and aggression, often referred to as the “master narrative.” This narrative sows the seeds of resistance within the collective psyche of its citizens, carefully selecting kernels of truth to “prove” China’s victimization primarily at the hands of the United States. Building upon these narratives, Xi has initiated a shift away from dwelling solely on humiliation and victimization, emphasizing the CCP’s ascent. However, the notion of alleged victimhood continues to underpin the diagnosis of contemporary global issues.

Once the narrative of trauma inflicted by the West is established, attention shifts toward framing enemy actions as the basis for a ‘us versus them’ struggle that must be overcome. The CCP highlights instances of Western foreign invasions, as exemplified in Iraq and Afghanistan, to illustrate imperialistic tendencies that pose a threat to China. Beijing need not search far to fuel concerns about a US threat, particularly after China’s elevation to the primary US competitor, as evidenced in the 2022 NSS. Xi has seized upon this to accuse the West of disseminating “anti-China” propaganda. The CCP employs terms such as racist, xenophobic, or Sinophobe when referencing the United States to deflect criticism.

Lastly, Beijing points to US involvement in regional Asian affairs and its role as a global “puppet master” within an international system perceived as rigged to disadvantage China. This puppet master narrative is wielded to drive a wedge between Southeast Asian countries and the United States.

Prognostic Frame

In response to this diagnosis of global challenges, the CCP presents itself and greater China as the remedy. The CCP attributes the nation’s successful revolution

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38 Yang, “China’s Strategic Narratives in Global Governance,” 300–01; and Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 47.
39 Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 98.
40 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 23.
to its ability to unite the country, lift it from ruin, and propel it to glory. Without the CCP’s leadership, achieving such a feat would have been implausible, serving as a crucial justification for the continuation of its one-party rule.  

Xi portrays a vision of a promising future led by China, poised to rectify the deficiencies of the current international system. He pledges to foster respect through harmony, delivered through the framework of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” China’s economic prowess and its willingness to invest in marginalized regions, he contends, stand as evidence of China’s benevolent leadership, commitment to mutual respect, and advocacy for a multipolar system. The national reunification and subsequent rejuvenation serve as just a glimpse of the global greatness that will result from renewed Chinese leadership in addressing contemporary global issues. This prognostication is also extendable to Southeast Asia under Xi’s vision of “Asia for Asians,” which promises increased prosperity through regional harmony.

### Motivational Frame

“Now is the time for China!” This is the rallying cry employed by Xi to inspire his party and nation to embrace the task at hand. The CCP has resurrected China, transforming it from a vulnerable nation into one destined to reclaim its central role on the global stage. The CCP stands alone among modern Chinese political entities for effectively resisting foreign aggression and repelling would-be subjugators.

The “Chinese Dream” is now within reach, which is why Xi emphasizes the advent of a “new era” and explicitly acknowledges its resonance with the people. The surge in Chinese exceptionalism, rooted in ancient tianxia principles, illustrates the rise of nationalism and signifies a means to disseminate Chinese values beyond its borders. It is both equitable and rational to reinstate China to its “rightful” position as the paramount global power, rectify the global order, and construct a superior world founded on harmony.

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42 Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 127.
43 Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 43.
44 Rudd, “The Return of Red China: Xi Jinping Brings Back Marxism.”
46 Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 43.
47 Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 91.
48 Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation, 77.
49 Yang, “China’s Strategic Narratives in Global Governance,” 301. Also, Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 15.
Once again, this motivational framework can be adapted for export to Southeast Asia. While the Chinese Dream may not have a direct translation, alternatives for a brighter future do exist. A reimagined international system founded on inclusivity and harmony, coupled with the concept of *tianxia*, holds appeal in Southeast Asia.

**Frame Resonance**

Frame resonance varies drastically depending on the audience. It is notably high within China’s borders, characterized by a strong sense of patriotism and robust public support.\(^5\) This is exemplified by internal polls conducted between 2003 and 2016, which yielded an average citizen satisfaction rating regarding the central government at a remarkable 89 percent (see fig. 1).\(^6\) In contrast, US presidents typically average around a 53 percent approval rating.

![Overall Satisfaction by Level of Government (2003-2016)](https://ash.harvard.edu/)

**Figure 1. Pre-COVID CCP Overall Satisfaction Poll** (Source: Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jesse Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion through Time* [Cambridge, MA: Ash Center, July 2020], https://ash.harvard.edu/.)

The high level of internal resonance arises from several factors. First, it attributes much of its strength to the recent robustness of the Chinese economy, which has brought tangible improvements to the population’s quality of life. Second, the CCP’s absolute control over information and its effective use of propaganda play a pivotal role, and we should not underestimate these aspects. Constructing a narrative hinges on selecting truths that deeply resonate with the target audience while

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The CCP demonstrates selective amnesia regarding its “dark anniversaries,” such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the 1959 Tibetan uprising, or the 1989 Tiananmen Square tragedy. These episodes are perceived as threats to the CCP and are entirely expunged from history, including public displays, textbooks, and any mention in various forms of media. Additionally, the CCP narrative adapts as the party’s needs evolve over time to ensure its sustained legitimacy and the advancement of its objectives.

Worth noting is the recent occurrence of protests in China due to Xi’s Zero-COVID policy, which is unusual given the CCP’s strict measures to suppress public dissent. This suggests some vulnerabilities in the CCP’s control and legitimacy, although it is premature to gauge the depth of this sentiment.

Externally, the CCP’s narrative encounters significantly more resistance and scrutiny. Many individuals and nations appear to regard China’s ascent with apprehension, driven by concerns about its expanding military power, growing international influence, and the repressive nature of the regime. Furthermore, China grapples with an image problem due to allegations of severe human rights violations, exemplified by the confirmed existence of Uyghur internment camps and forced sterilization campaigns on women. Western countries tend to hold a more negative view of China than their Asian counterparts, although both groups believe that China’s influence is on the rise while that of the United States is declining (see fig. 2).

Southeast Asian countries share a more intricate relationship with China compared to the West. As territorial neighbors, “countries in the region found it necessary to thread carefully when engaging in major powers, finding balance between competing economic assistance and balancing political-security trade-offs.” This balancing act is evident in the prevalent hedging strategies adopted by Southeast Asia.

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58 Nestor Herico, “China’s Use of Influence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia,” e-mail response to the author, 30 November 2022.
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Asian nations, with Thailand, for instance, embracing a policy of “active neutrality” for precisely this reason.59

![Figure 2. Polls on US/China Favorable Ratings & China’s Growing Influence.](Source: Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “Across 19 Countries, More People See the U.S. than China Favorably—but More See China’s Influence Growing,” Pew Research Center (blog), 29 June 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/)

Ongoing disputes, such as those in the South China Sea (SCS), significantly challenge China’s narrative. Beijing asserts sovereignty over the SCS islands and adjacent waters, a claim contested by six other Southeast Asian nations in accor-

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dance with the 1994 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This serves as an example of a contradiction in the CCP's narrative, particularly regarding its respect for the sovereignty of other countries.

Culturally, however, Southeast Asian countries exhibit a greater receptiveness to Chinese influence at a broader level. Chinese culture and economic ventures are widely exported throughout the region, affording the CCP substantial influence and a degree of familiarity and shared values to propagate its narrative. Internally within China, frame alignment is reasonably well-established due to the CCP's control over information and its capacity for indoctrination. Externally, achieving frame alignment becomes considerably more challenging, given the complexity of obscuring information on a broader scale.

**Threat Strategy**

To grasp the intricacies of the CCP's approach to achieving its regional and global objectives, we need to delve into its threat strategy. This strategy involves a multifaceted approach that combines regional aspirations with global ambitions. In this section, we will explore the specific objectives and methods that the CCP employs to secure its regional interests, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. At the core of this regional strategy lies the unspoken core interest of reunifying Taiwan, a goal that holds immense significance for the CCP's legitimacy and its broader global agenda.

With this context in mind, we will examine the ways and means that the CCP uses to achieve its regional objectives. This includes an analysis of its strategic approach, which leverages unrestricted warfare to mobilize all aspects of national power in alignment with the CCP's Five-Sphere Integrated Plan. Furthermore, we will delve into the distinct lines of effort—secure, indoctrinate, and subjugate—that the CCP employs to set conditions for reunification while pursuing other core interests.

Now, let us proceed to analyze the components and intricacies of the CCP's threat strategy as it unfolds in the Southeast Asian region.

**Ends**

The CCP's overarching objectives revolve around securing regional goals to facilitate its broader global aspirations. This dual pursuit of regional and global

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61 Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 42.
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objectives underscores the importance of regional hegemony, which not only bolsters China’s legitimacy but also fortifies its influence on the global stage. Our focus here is on the CCP’s regional aspirations in Southeast Asia, a critical aspect of its threat strategy. Central to these regional ambitions, albeit unacknowledged by China, lies the reunification of Taiwan—an issue so vital that it is considered a nonnegotiable core interest for the CCP due to its direct impact on legitimacy.62

To realize these regional ambitions effectively, the CCP adopts a strategic approach aimed at setting conditions for Taiwan's reunification while simultaneously advancing its other core interests, which include ensuring the security of China and the party, securing essential resources and logistics, reducing US influence, and enhancing China’s global image and public opinion. This strategy aligns seamlessly with the CCP's comprehensive Five-Sphere Integrated Plan, which encompasses economic, political, cultural, social, and eco-environmental domains to bring the Chinese Dream to fruition.63

Ways and Means

Strategic Approach. The CCP employs unrestricted warfare as its strategic approach to achieving its objectives. This iteration of IW mobilizes all the instruments of national power, operationalizing methods outlined in the CCP’s Five-Sphere Integrated Plan. Beijing wages political and influence warfare with the intent of achieving objectives and gaining a cognitive advantage. This approach “is a coercive struggle that erodes or builds legitimacy for the purpose of political power.”64

Due to the nature of unrestricted warfare, traditional phasing is not observed, except in the context of the reunification of Taiwan. Here, the CCP adopts a calculated approach, setting conditions in its favor for reunification before considering forceful actions such as military invasion. Ideally, Beijing prefers coercion over the use of force and employs three primary lines of effort (LOE) to achieve its objectives: secure, indoctrinate, and subjugate. Each LOE includes subordinate campaigns designed to achieve interim goals that ultimately lead to the desired outcomes, as depicted in figure 3. Coercive tactics are consistently employed across these LOEs, encompassing subversion, bribery, seduction, confusion, and entrap-

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ment, among others, effectively transforming conventional statecraft and soft power into weapons in a new era of warfare.

**Figure 3. CCP unrestricted warfare strategy design**

**Secure Line of Effort.** The Secure LOE’s primary objective is to fortify China’s position and enhance its strength. In Southeast Asia, this effort predominantly centers around three major initiatives: the BRI, SCS activities, and military expansion. Within this LOE, the BRI aims to bolster China’s logistical networks and secure access to critical raw materials, ensuring sustainable growth and preparedness for potential conflicts.65 The CCP’s “dual circulation” policy seeks to establish domestic supply chain resilience by exploring alternative organic options that circumvent vulnerable strategic choke points.66 Beijing perceives choke points like the Straits of Malacca as potential areas of risk that could threaten China’s stability during heightened tensions or conflicts with the United States. Currently, approximately 76 percent of China’s oil imports and 23 percent of its natural gas imports pass through the Strait of Malacca and the SCS.67 Concerns regarding the United States’ ability to effectively implement a military blockade have significant implications for China’s military objectives, including the potential retak-

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The transition toward organic logistics and production not only enhances China’s economy but also confers strategic advantages.

To counterbalance the United States’ military superiority, there has been a substantial overhaul of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in recent years. The CCP is committed to achieving a world-class military with an accelerated target of 2027, emphasizing the concept of active defense in the region and taking Taiwan by force. The bolstering of military hard power serves to reinforce the CCP’s soft power and influence pursuits in the region. Furthermore, this modernization effort extends Beijing’s operational reach, creating a security buffer while limiting US access and maneuverability.

China’s considerable influence over Cambodia serves as a prime illustration of the CCP’s strategy to mitigate logistical and resource risks through military access. The CCP has made substantial investments in Cambodia’s Port of Sihanoukville/Ream Naval Base area, which includes the donation of 14 warships and patrol boats. While acknowledging concerns raised by neighboring countries, Cambodia has affirmed its sovereign right to receive foreign assistance for self-defense, asserting, “No foreign country will be given exclusive rights in the management of this base nor in other activities in any part of it.” However, Cambodia has not outright rejected China’s utilization of the port, as indicated in an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) report. This situation epitomizes the CCP’s utilization of economic means to exert influence. The CCP capitalizes on corruption, cronyism, and nepotism in Cambodia, exploiting President Xi’s close ties with Prime Minister Hun Sen to further China’s strategic objectives. The CCP’s assertive territorial claims in the SCS further underscore its efforts to strengthen security projection and resource access.

The CCP’s persistent assertion of sovereignty over the vast majority of the SCS through its nine-dash line creates a significant military advantage for Beijing in the region (see fig. 4). In 2009, the CCP reaffirmed its position at the UN, stating, “China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the SCS and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.” However, this stance directly contradicts

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68 Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, V.
69 Burgos and Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests in Cambodia,” 620.
71 Burgos and Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests in Cambodia,” 632.
the 2016 UN arbitral tribunal’s ruling on the Philippines’ case against China, which overwhelmingly rejected China’s claims, including the illegitimacy of its nine-dash line. China responded negatively, asserting that the ruling was “null and void,” maintaining an assertive posture to defend its position. China’s expansion into the SCS serves to secure access to natural resources and supply routes, while simultaneously projecting military capability around Taiwan, making US intervention in the region more challenging. Furthermore, the CCP employs a blend of legal and coercive tactics in its lawfare approach to advance SCS claims, effectively holding territory. The CCP’s utilization of fishing vessels and its maritime militia to advance political objectives in disputed waters while obscuring ownership of these fleets ensures plausible deniability.

**Indoctrinate Line of Effort.** The Indoctrinate LOE predominantly encompasses efforts under the CCP’s United Front initiative and psychological and public opinion warfare, which are nested under the Three Warfare doctrine. Beijing pursues a strategy of “constant, ongoing activity aimed at long-term influence of perceptions and attitudes.” Campaigns within this LOE strive to sway nations and populations in Southeast Asia to align with China’s causes while molding perceptions in favor of Beijing, enabling future actions. Notably, not all aspects of this LOE are overtly coercive. China allocates substantial resources, amounting to billions of dollars, to promote Chinese language, facilitate educational exchanges, expand media cooperation, and elevate pop culture icons—potential tools of soft power intended to secure diplomatic and economic advantages. These forms of soft power serve as vehicles to export Chinese culture to the broader region. A notable influence tactic in this regard is the “slow burn,” involving the gradual influence of populations over generations without arousing suspicion.

74 Nestor Herico, e-mail.
77 Herico, e-mail.
Irregular Influence

domain to its advantage. Such tactics have been documented in regional neighbors, including Thailand.


Leveraging the widespread Chinese diaspora in the region has proven effective in advancing cultural expansionism, given its inherent sympathies toward China. For instance, Singapore boasts a substantial majority, approximately 74.5 percent, of Chinese descendants among its population. Consequently, Beijing promotes a narrative portraying Singapore as a “Chinese country,” implying a loyalty to “greater

China." The diaspora has been subject to blackmail and coercion, serving as a conduit to access foreign technology acquisition strategies and intelligence. This tactic extends beyond Singapore and is employed across the region, facilitated by the CCP’s advanced surveillance capabilities.

**Subjugate Line of Effort.** This is designed to compel compliance with Beijing’s directives within the region. This approach involves a multifaceted strategy, employing both incentives and punitive measures to entice regional neighbors and coerce them when necessary. A clear manifestation of this strategy can be seen in the CCP’s interest in the Mekong Basin. China is nearing completion of its fourth hydroelectric dam on the upper Mekong River, granting the CCP control over water flow and energy production to downstream countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This control provides Beijing with a significant source of coercive power, given the Mekong River’s critical role as a major artery in Southeast Asia. The CCP also combines nontraditional security (NTS) efforts in this region with its growing involvement in international organizations like ASEAN to bolster regional influence. Substantial evidence supports the CCP’s regional NTS participation to achieve geopolitical objectives, including the New Security Concept of 2002, which aims to counterbalance US influence.

Attractive offerings under the BRI have led weaker nations to submit to the CCP’s will. In Cambodia, BRI projects and infrastructure aid come with favorable terms that undercut competing lenders. The CCP, through Chinese state-owned enterprises, can finance projects that hold long-term strategic political significance, even if they lack immediate financial viability. This approach allows China to secure Cambodia’s unwavering allegiance, which it leverages as a pawn in great-power competition. Cambodia benefits by gaining security, stability, and investment in exchange for Beijing’s ability to influence its decisions in critical regional votes or disputes. Cambodia’s complicit obstruction of measures condemning CCP actions in the SCS within ASEAN forums serves as a case in point.

Retribution, or the threat thereof, constitutes another CCP influence warfare tactic. Restrictions on investment, trade, and tourism pose significant concerns for Southeast Asian nations, as China represents the largest importer of goods in the

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82 Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 133.
83 Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.
84 Burgos and Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests in Cambodia,” 622.
85 Xue Gong, “Non-Traditional Security Cooperation between China and South-East Asia: Implications for Indo-Pacific Geopolitics,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (1 January 2020), 35.
region and the final destination for many regional consumables. For instance, the Philippines experienced a series of restrictions from 2012 to 2014 in response to its filing of charges over contested areas in the SCS to the UNCLOS arbitral tribunal. The CCP implemented restrictions on Philippine banana imports and Chinese tourism as a public punitive measure while maintaining a veil of deniability.  

**Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities**

In the realm of the CCP’s governance and its role on the global stage, understanding the concept of *center of gravity* (COG) is paramount. This section delves into the COG and its accompanying critical vulnerabilities (CV), illuminating the core of CCP’s power and the vulnerabilities that surround it. As the CCP consolidates its authority as China’s paramount decision maker, the COG represents the linchpin upon which its influence and policies pivot. However, this concentration of power also exposes the CCP to vulnerabilities, both domestically and internationally.

Let us explore the intricacies of the COG and the vulnerabilities that challenge the CCP’s stability and legitimacy.

**Century of Gravity**

The legitimacy of CCP governance as the exclusive arbiter of policy and power in China constitutes the COG. In its role as an autocratic governing body, the CCP has positioned itself at the apex of decision making within the nation. This positioning significantly enhances the government’s capacity to enforce its directives, owing to the concentration of control and authority at its highest echelons. However, as discussed in the section on Chinese exceptionalism, this centralized leadership also places sole responsibility on the leadership when outcomes deviate from the intended course. Mismanagement of narratives and a failure to sustain China’s prosperity could raise doubts regarding the CCP’s legitimacy and its vision for the future.

**Critical Vulnerabilities**

The most substantial vulnerability to the CCP’s legitimacy, particularly on the international stage, is Beijing’s inconsistent narrative. Idealistic phrases like *harmony*, *peaceful coexistence*, and *noninterference*, employed by Xi to portray China as a benevolent emerging power, stand in stark contrast to the coercive trade agreements

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and encroachments into sovereign territories. The CCP’s actions in the SCS provide a glaring example of Beijing simultaneously professing adherence to international rule of law while subverting it.

The second CV is Beijing’s ideology, which can be exploited. In repressive forms of government, rifts are likely to emerge over time. The masses are often willing to endure repressive control if their living standards remain reasonable, especially when those standards continue to rise, as has been the case in recent years. As noted in the context of exceptionalism, once a pattern of upward mobility becomes the norm, it can be expected. Vulnerabilities arise when China’s economic growth levels off or encounters setbacks. Moreover, highlighting inconsistencies in the ideology can serve to undermine it. In a socialist government, this may reveal clear class distinctions between affluent party members and the proletariat. Such discrepancies undermine Maoist principles and, when coupled with simmering discontent, as witnessed during the Zero-COVID policy protests, can fracture the nation.

Present Government Response

In the face of China’s ascendancy as a prominent global player, the United States has undertaken a comprehensive and resolute response strategy. This concluding section delves into the present government response, highlighting the gravity with which the United States views China’s rise.

State Perception of the Threat

The United States’ elevation of China as the primary pacing threat in its national strategic documents underscores its serious concern regarding China’s ascent. The shift in focus is quantified by notable changes in combatant command (COCOM) priorities and defense expenditures, as evidenced in the recent National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) since 2019.

Acknowledging the CCP’s activities across the spectrum of competition, the United States is actively developing strategies to address identified gaps. The renewed emphasis on the US theory of victory in the Indo-Pacific region places significant importance on the enhancement of collective capacity with allies and partner nations. The overarching goal is to ensure the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open, while safeguarding the current rules-based international order.

**Response Strategy**

The US strategy takes a comprehensive approach to outperforming China, with a focus on three key areas. First, it involves strengthening domestic capabilities. Second, it seeks alignment with allies and partners to pursue common goals. Third, it aims to compete effectively in shaping the global environment surrounding China. This competitive approach is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific region but extends globally.\(^\text{90}\)

While competition is a significant aspect, President Joe Biden also recognizes the importance of collaboration on transnational issues, particularly those where interests align, such as addressing climate change.\(^\text{91}\)

Furthermore, notable progress has been achieved through initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy, which has received positive feedback from ASEAN.\(^\text{92}\) Additionally, recent economic policies, including the CHIPS Act and targeted sanctions in the semiconductor sector, demonstrate a strong commitment to confronting China.\(^\text{93}\)

**Critique**

The current US strategy exhibits significant gaps and remains incomplete. It lacks a discernable end-state beyond the overarching goal of approaching China from a position of strength and surpassing it. Ambiguity in key policy areas, such as Taiwan, may be intentional to influence CCP decision making. However, this ambiguity also raises doubts among our regional allies and partners, many of whom have already adopted hedging strategies. To address this, deliberate efforts should be made to cultivate stronger relationships with our partners and align our interests more effectively. To date, our strategy has been predominantly regionally formulaic, overlooking nuanced opportunities that could be leveraged with existing partners and newcomers alike.

Moreover, the United States has lost its ability to craft a compelling narrative that contrasts with that of the CCP. Previously, Washington projected itself as “the leader of the free world.” However, America appears to have not only lost its footing on the global stage but also its voice. Nevertheless, the United States still pos-

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\(^{90}\) National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 24, 37.


serves a value proposition that sharply contrasts with that of China. It is crucial to elevate strategic communications and narrative within our strategy moving forward. Rectifying misinformation and highlighting CCP contradictions can help bridge gaps in messaging and influence warfare that have not yet been addressed. Prioritizing truth in messaging aligns with our liberal democratic core values when operating in the information environment. Crafting a more holistic strategy that elevates various instruments of power alongside traditional military deterrence will present complex scenarios for Beijing to navigate.

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