

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

Sheena Chestnut Greitens

“China’s Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia”

This article argues that the People’s Republic of China uses its police and internal security forces as a nontraditional means of projecting strategic Landpower in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia. Instead of limiting analysis of China’s power projection to military forces, this article employs new data on Chinese police engagements abroad to fill a gap in our understanding of the operating environment in Asia. Policymakers will gain an understanding of how these activities enhance China’s presence, partnerships, and influence across the region to inform the development of recommendations for a more effective response.

Read the article here: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss1/5/>

Email usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

Keywords: China, strategic Landpower, internal security, security force assistance, police

Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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My guest today is Dr. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, author of “[China’s Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia](#).” Greitens is associate professor at the (Lyndon B. Johnson or) LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, where she directs (University of Texas or) UT’s Asia Policy Program.

She’s currently serving as a visiting associate professor of research in Indo-Pacific security at the US Army War College’s China Landpower Studies Center at the Strategic Studies Institute. She’s also concurrently a nonresident scholar with the (Carnegie) Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Welcome to Decisive Point, Sheena.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens

Thanks so much. It’s great to be with you today.

Host

Let’s just go ahead and jump right in. You note in your article that the People’s Republic of China defines national security more broadly than the United States does. Will you expand on that concept for us, please?

Greitens

Yeah, sure. The (People’s Republic of China or) PRC has explained its concept of national security, which you could also translate as state security, starting in 2014, when Xi Jinping announced something that he called the comprehensive national security concept, and even when he announced it 10 years ago, that concept was very broad. It had 13 or 14 different components of national security, but he’s added a bunch since.

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And so, the definition of national security has expanded even more in his first two terms in office. It includes things like territorial integrity, territorial security, border security, [and] homeland security, that we might think of as more typical components of national security, but it also includes a lot of dimensions that we might not necessarily automatically associate with national security, whether it’s economic security, data security, energy and food security, biological security, et cetera.

The first thing to know about this concept is just how extraordinarily broad it is. And so, national security and the national security toolkit can be used to tackle anything that the (Chinese Communist Party or) CCP views as threatening.

[The] second thing to know about how the PRC defines national security is that it really includes a heavy focus on internal security, and the internal and external dimensions of national security are very closely linked in Xi Jinping’s thinking. What that means is that the foundation of national security for the CCP is what they call political security: the security of China’s socialist system, the authority of the CCP’s Central Committee, and Xi Jinping as the core of that (Chinese) Communist Party leadership.

So, it’s really a regime security concept, which makes it very different from a conception of national security that is rooted in defending the homeland and the people from external threats, which is more the way that we tend to think about it in the United States.

Host

In pursuing national objectives, China regularly engages with foreign counterparts. Do you have some examples that you could share with us?

Greitens

In pursuing these national objectives—because the definition of national security is so expansive and includes such a major role for internal security and the political security of the CCP as the leader and the governing authority of China—there’s a much greater role for law enforcement and for nontraditional security actors to engage with foreign counterparts.

One of the things I do in the article in Parameters is to map out how active China’s police and law enforcement officials, the internal security apparatus, has become as a foreign policy actor. So, there’s a map in the last year—actually I think it’s between the 20th Party Congress in October of 2022 and a year later, October 2023—what did the internal security apparatus do in Chinese foreign policy?

And it turns out they had a lot of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements. The map is intended to show where China’s law enforcement and internal security outreach is concentrated. Most of it’s on China’s periphery.

The other thing that China does in terms of engagement with foreign counterparts by the internal security apparatus, and by the nonmilitary, nontraditional security forces, is that it’s got this new initiative proposed by Xi Jinping called (Global Security Initiative or) GSI. There are an increasing number of countries, I think we’re up to about 70, that have indicated support for GSI in China’s bilateral diplomatic engagements. The last was Sierra Leone during a high-level summit last week.

GSI itself is a little bit vague. It talks about the need to revise global security governance. It talks about the need to address nontraditional security cooperation and have a stronger framework for doing that, but it’s really the heart of what that actually looks like in practice seems to be playing out in these very individualized bilateral security cooperation deals that China is signing or pursuing with various countries.

Vietnam during the state visit in December, the one in Hungary got people’s attention because Hungary is a NATO ally and yet, now they’re also signing a security cooperation agreement with China, which is a little bit puzzling to some

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of us, except that the kind of security that China’s offering under its deal with Hungary is very, very different. It’s that regime security, law enforcement, [and] internal security cooperation, not the kind of external defense and external security that NATO provides and has provided for years.

So, those are some examples of some of the types of engagements with foreign counterparts that we see as a result of this push to use the internal security apparatus as a foreign policy actor.

Host

What are the implications of the PRC’s internal security agency outreach?

Greitens

I think this is a really important question for global politics and one that is evolving because China’s behavior itself is evolving. Xi Jinping went in the late 20-teens and told his internal security apparatus to adopt a more global vision for state security outreach, and the internal security agencies appear to have responded in the last five or so years to that call by becoming increasingly active.

And so, the first thing I think we need to know is just that China’s internal security apparatus is a foreign policy actor and we just haven’t typically always included it in our thinking about what China’s foreign policy presence is. So, I think the first thing is that these international activities by China’s various internal security forces should be included in our assessments of China’s regional and global security presence if we want to get a complete picture of the American military and the (US government or) USG’s operating environment in Asia.

I think then there are a couple reasons why that’s important. One, these activities augment traditional military power by improving PRC intelligence and domain awareness in the various countries where these internal security forces are operating. They often obtain different information, you know, have slightly different sets of relationships by virtue of their mission focus. They offer additional opportunities for the CCP and PRC officials to shape the information environment, to maybe engage in narrative competition with the United States. They provide some concrete security benefits sometimes on problems that the United States or its allies and partners haven’t always focused on in Asia, particularly with respect to nontraditional security.

But at the same time, those concrete security benefits come with the dissemination of particular ideas about what internal security forces can or should do with respect to political control, regime security, roles in repression or censorship, et cetera.

And then the final implication is that we’ve been talking a lot about the vulnerability of allies and partners at a national level to potential PRC coercion, because that bears on supply-chain security or sustainability in various potential contingencies. And so, if countries come to depend on not just PRC’s economy and economic cooperation, trade investment from the PRC, but also on the PRC for provision of domestic security or public safety, then that could open up a new avenue of potential coercion that could become really politically important and be a key vulnerability going forward, especially for allies and partners, but also for a wider range of third countries.

Broadly, I think this is really important because China is using this as a set of tools that are sort of unusual, but that really do seem to me to be enhancing its security presence, its partnerships, and its overall political and security influence throughout Asia. And so, I think that’s really worth us paying attention to.

Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts you’d like to share before we go?

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Greitens

[There is] one more thing that I think is important. The article goes through some of the potential implications or potential things to consider—questions that this raises for the interagency, for the (Department of Defense or) DoD, and for, you know, the Army and (United States Indo-Pacific Command or) INDOPACOM. One of the things that I think we might need to look at is how our security force assistance programs are operating in Asia, both the Army’s Security Force Assistance Brigades that do work in INDOPACOM and Central Asia, but also the broader interagency process because there’s a wide range of tools, but if we don’t have a good mapping of the kinds of activities that the PRC’s engaged in, we may be missing opportunities to provide an alternative solution that would be in the United States’ interest, in the allied and partner interest, and in the interests of the recipient countries that are currently looking to China, simply because they don’t know whether there is an alternative and whether it would better meet their nontraditional security need.

I won’t go into a ton of detail here, but for folks who are interested, the article raises a few thoughts about avenues that the Army and the broader USG might explore to try to think about the tools available to deal with this facet of the evolving security landscape in Asia.

Host

Thank you for making time to speak with me today.

Greitens

Thanks so much for having me.

Host

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