

# What Does China Want?

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There is much about China that is disturbing for the West. China's gross domestic product grew from \$1.2 trillion in 2000 to \$17 trillion in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Having modernized the People's Liberation Army over the past generation, China is also rapidly increasing its stockpile of nuclear warheads. China spends almost \$300 billion annually on defense.<sup>2</sup> Current leader Xi Jinping has consolidated power and appears set to rule the authoritarian Communist country indefinitely. Chinese firms often engage in questionable activities, such as restricting data, inadequately enforcing intellectual property rights, and engaging in cyber theft.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government violates human rights and restricts numerous personal freedoms for its citizens. In violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), every country in the region, including China, is reclaiming land and militarizing islets in the disputed East and South China Seas. In short, China poses many potential problems to the United States and indeed to the world.

In U.S. academic and policymaking circles, the conventional wisdom is that China wants to dominate the world and expand its territory. For example,

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The authors thank Victor Cha, Noel Foster, Ronan Tse-min Fu, Charles Glaser, Stephan Haggard, Paul Heer, Amoz Hor, Chin-Hao Huang, Yuji Idomoto, Van Jackson, Xinru Ma, Jonathan Markowitz, and Victor Shih for their detailed comments on earlier drafts of this article. The authors especially thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions and Aerlynn Ding and Zoe Wallace for excellent research assistance. An earlier version of this article was presented at the University of Southern California Korean Studies Institute's Working Paper Series. Online supplementary materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/II7CWO>.

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1. World Development Indicators, DataBank, World Bank, 2025, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.
2. In comparison, the United States spent \$810 billion on defense in 2023. Chief Financial Officer, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview 2023: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023\\_Budget\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_Budget_Request.pdf).
3. Katie Silver, "China's Trade Practices Come Under Fire," *BBC News*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58991339>.

Elbridge Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense during Donald Trump's first term and undersecretary of defense for Trump's second term, writes: "If China could subjugate Taiwan, it could then lift its gaze to targets farther afield . . . a natural next target for Beijing would be the Philippines . . . Vietnam, although not a U.S. ally, might also make a good target."<sup>4</sup> Rush Doshi, deputy senior director for China and Taiwan during the Joe Biden administration and a key architect of the Biden administration's China policy, writes that China has been playing a long game to "displace the United States as world leader."<sup>5</sup> Aaron Friedberg, deputy assistant for national security affairs and director of policy planning for Vice President Dick Cheney during the George W. Bush administration, warns of "China's expanding territorial claims" and its aggressive attempt to "replace the United States as the world's leading economic and technological nation and to displace it as the preponderant power in East Asia."<sup>6</sup> Stephen Walt writes that the problem is "regional hegemony in Asia: China would like to have it . . . and use that position to make significant revisions to the international status quo."<sup>7</sup> Hal Brands and Michael Beckley assert that "although Beijing would surely like to knock Vietnam down, an even juicier target would be the Philippines, which meets all the criteria of being a perfect enemy . . . the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] is undertaking an epic project to rewrite the rules of global order in Asia and far beyond . . . it wants to be *the superpower*."<sup>8</sup> The then-U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in 2022 that "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."<sup>9</sup> Trump's former U.S. trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, claims that "China to me is an existential threat to the United

4. Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 116–117.

5. Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 51.

6. Aaron L. Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2022), p. 142; Aaron L. Friedberg, "An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing," *Foreign Affairs*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression>.

7. Stephen Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Spring 2025), pp. 37–70, quotes at pp. 37, 39, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00508](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00508).

8. Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022), pp. 1, 129. Emphasis in original.

9. Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Blinken Speech: The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China," speech presented at George Washington University, May 26, 2022, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Australia, <https://au.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinken-speech-the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

States. . . . China views itself as number one in the world and wants to be that way.”<sup>10</sup>

These assessments of China’s intentions lead mainstream U.S. scholars and policy analysts from both the Left and the Right to policy prescriptions that will take generations to unfold, and that are almost completely focused on war-fighting, deterrence, and decoupling from China. Those who believe in this China threat call for increasing U.S. military expenditures and showing “resolve” toward China. The conventional wisdom also advocates a regional expansion of alliances with any country, democratic or authoritarian, that could join the United States to contain China.<sup>11</sup> As Colby writes, “This is a book about war.”<sup>12</sup> Brands and Beckley argue that the United States should reinforce its efforts to deter China from invading Taiwan: “What is needed is a strategy to deter or perhaps win a conflict in the 2020s . . . the Pentagon can dramatically raise the costs of a Chinese invasion by turning the international waters of the Taiwan Strait into a death trap for attacking forces.”<sup>13</sup> Doshi argues that the United States should arm countries such as “Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India” with capabilities to contain China.<sup>14</sup>

This leads to a key question: What does China want? To answer this question, this article examines contemporary China’s goals and fears in words and deeds. In contrast to the conventional view, the evidence provided in this article leads to one overarching conclusion and three specific observations. Overall, China is a status quo power concerned with regime stability, and it re-

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10. Scott Pelley, “Trump’s Former Trade Chief Says China Is a Threat, Tariffs Are Necessary,” *CBS News*, February 2, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-former-trade-chief-robert-lighthizer-says-china-is-a-threat-tariffs-are-necessary-60-minutes-transcript/>. See also: Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, “The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-19/new-cold-war>; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Misplaced Restraint: The Quincy Coalition Versus Liberal Internationalism,” *Survival*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2021), p. 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187>; John J. Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>.

11. In Elbridge Colby’s words, “It may be advantageous or even necessary for an anti-hegemonic coalition [against China] to associate with nonrepublican governments. This is especially important in Asia, where many states are not democracies or are only inconsistently or imperfectly democratic.” Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, p. 71.

12. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

13. Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, pp. 177–178.

14. Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 318.

mains more inwardly focused than externally oriented. More specifically: China's aims are unambiguous; China's aims are enduring; and China's aims are limited.

First, China's aims are unambiguous: China cares about its borders, its sovereignty, and its foreign economic relations. China cares about its unresolved borders in the East and South China Seas and with India, respectively. Almost all of its concerns are regional. Second, China deeply cares about its sovereign rights over various parts of China that the rest of the region has agreed are Chinese—Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Third, China has an increasingly clear economic strategy for its relations with both East Asia and the rest of the world that aims to expand trade and economic relations, not reduce them.

It is also clear what China does not want: There is little mention in Chinese discourse of expansive goals or ambitions for global leadership and hegemony. Furthermore, China is not exporting ideology. Significantly, the CCP's emphasis on "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is not a generalized model for the world.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the United States claims to represent global values and norms. What China also does not want is to invade and conquer other countries; there is no evidence that China poses an existential threat to the countries on its borders or in its region that it does not already claim sovereignty over.

We explore how China views its own position and role in the region and globally. Recognizing that public statements vary in their level of authoritarianism, we examined three main sources: *People's Daily*, which represents not only the state but also the Central Committee of the CCP; Xi Jinping's and other senior officials' speeches; and *Qiushi*, a magazine publicizing the CCP's latest policy directions. We used computer-assisted text analysis to systematically assess China's stated goals over time. This method allowed us to more accurately track China's concerns and identify how they have changed. We also show that China's top leaders consistently reiterate that China does not seek regional hegemony or aim to compete with the United States for

15. 习近平,“高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗——在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告,”新华网 [Xi Jinping, Uphold the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and strive in unity for the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country—Report delivered at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xinhua], October 25, 2022, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content\\_5721685.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm).

global supremacy. Instead, China views international relations as multilateral and cooperative.

Second, China's aims are inherited and enduring, not new. There is a "trans-dynastic" Chinese identity: Almost every major issue that the People's Republic of China (PRC) cares about today dates back to at least the nineteenth century during the Qing dynasty. These are not new goals that emerged after the Communist victory in 1949, and none of China's core interests were created by Xi. These are enduring Chinese concerns, even though the political authority governing China has changed dramatically and multiple times over the past two hundred years or more.

Third, what China wants is limited, even though its power has rapidly expanded over the past generation. China's claims and goals are either being resolved or remain static. This reality is in contrast to many of the expectations of U.S. policymakers and to the conventional wisdom of the international relations scholarly literature, which maintains that states' interests will grow as power grows. Rather, the evidence shows that the Chinese leadership is concerned about internal challenges more than external threats or expansion.

We find that China does not pose the type of military threat that the conventional wisdom claims it does. Consequently, there is no need for a hostile military posture in the Pacific, and indeed the United States may be unnecessarily creating tensions. Just as important, we suggest that there is room for the two countries to cooperate on a number of issues areas that are currently overlooked. Finally, the conventional view of China de-emphasizes the economic and diplomatic arenas that a war-fighting approach is unsuited to address. The conventional wisdom about U.S. grand strategy is problematic, and the vision of China that exists in Washington is dangerously wrong.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the conventional wisdom regarding China's goals as represented by top policymakers in the United States and in the existing scholarly literature. The second section examines Chinese rhetoric and points out nuances in how to read and interpret Chinese rhetoric. The third section uses quantitative methods to more systematically and accurately assess Chinese claims across time as reflected in the most authoritative Chinese pronouncements. The fourth section details how China's main priorities are enduring and trans-dynastic, and the fifth section shows how the most important of these claims are not expanding, even though China's power has grown rapidly over the past generation. We present the implications of our argument for the U.S.-China relationship in the conclusion.

## The Conventional Wisdom About What China Wants

In the past few years, a consensus has emerged among U.S. policymakers from both the Left and the Right and, to a lesser extent, in the academic literature. This view maintains that China is a grave threat to the United States and that the United States needs to prioritize military means to contain and deter China. The conventional wisdom has cohered around the idea that China aims to displace the United States as the global hegemon and intends to rewrite or take over the so-called rules-based liberal international order.<sup>16</sup> National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, echoing a statement from Biden, said that “the PRC [is] the only state with both the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the anonymous author of the Atlantic Council’s *Longer Telegram* views China as having expansive goals to “displace [the United States] as the world’s dominant economic power . . . achieve military preponderance sufficient to deter the United States . . . form the foundation for a future Sinocentric global order . . . advance a new, hierarchical, authoritarian conception of international order.”<sup>18</sup>

Trump’s deputy national security advisor during his first term, Matt Pottinger, and then–Republican Congressman Mike Gallagher describe China’s “malevolent strategy . . . Beijing is pursuing a raft of global initiatives designed to disintegrate the West and usher in an antidemocratic order . . . Xi and his inner circle see themselves as fighting an existential ideological campaign against the West.”<sup>19</sup> Michael Sobolik argues that for centuries “China

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16. Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, “Domestic Politics, China’s Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 635–664, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081832000048X>.

17. Jake Sullivan, “Remarks and Q&A by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on the Future of U.S.-China Relations,” remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, January 30, 2024, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/remarks-and-qa-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-the-future-of-u-s-china-relations/>. For exceptions, see: Avery Goldstein, “China’s Grand Strategy Under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance,” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Summer 2020), pp. 164–201, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00383](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00383); Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00115](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00115).

18. Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy*, Atlantic Council Strategy Papers (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2021), p. 8, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram/>.

19. Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher, “No Substitute for Victory: America’s Competition with China Must Be Won, Not Managed,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/no-substitute-victory-pottinger-gallagher>.

has been a civilizational juggernaut striving for political hegemony. . . . This struggle that was once relegated to the nations of East Asia is now a challenge for every country in the world . . . Beijing is approaching the world not to embrace it, but to rule it.”<sup>20</sup>

Adam Liff argues that “beyond rapidly advancing capabilities, China’s policies and rhetoric toward its neighbors are perceived overseas as increasingly and provocatively ‘assertive,’ even ‘aggressive.’”<sup>21</sup> In the words of John Owen, “In the twenty-first century, particularly since Xi Jinping became head of the CCP in 2012, Beijing has shifted from a defensive to an offensive stance, becoming more assertive in trying to drain liberalism out of the international order and to make it friendlier to China and the CCP.”<sup>22</sup> As far back as 1993, Richard Betts asked, “Should we want China to get rich or not? For realists, the answer should be no, since a rich China would overturn any balance of power.”<sup>23</sup> Keren Yarhi-Milo and her coauthors predict that “China’s rapid military modernization and increasingly assertive behavior will likely fuel the perception that the United States and many regional states have common security interests . . . Vietnam could become a major security partner of the United States.”<sup>24</sup> John Mearsheimer posits that China “wants to be the most powerful state in its backyard and, eventually, in the world.”<sup>25</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry assert the “undeniable reality of China’s expansion and hegemonic aspirations.”<sup>26</sup>

Many scholars and policymakers focus almost exclusively on the ways in which the United States can deter China or fight for Taiwan, and they view Taiwan as the stepping stone to further Chinese expansionism.<sup>27</sup> A 2023 Council on Foreign Relations’ Task Force report concludes, “If China were to annex Taiwan . . . it would be able to limit the U.S. military’s operations in the

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20. Michael Sobolik, “Xi’s Imperial Ambitions Are Rooted in China’s History,” *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/27/xi-imperial-ambitions-chinese-history-empire-dynasty/>.

21. Adam P. Liff, “Whither the Balancers? The Case for a Methodological Reset,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 2016), p. 440, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195624>.

22. John M. Owen IV, “Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions,” *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Winter 2024/25), p. 118, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00503](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00503).

23. Richard K. Betts, “Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States After the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94), p. 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539205>.

24. Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zack Cooper, “To Arm or to Ally? The Patron’s Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Fall 2016), p. 138, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00250](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00250).

25. Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry,” p. 51.

26. Deudney and Ikenberry, “Misplaced Restraint,” p. 10.

27. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, pp. 116–117; Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, p. 129.

region and in turn its ability to defend its Asian allies.”<sup>28</sup> Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge argue that “control of Taiwan would open up a new military option for China, one that several previous great powers thought very useful.”<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Economy predicts that “as Chinese military capabilities continue to grow, it will likely move beyond its focus on Taiwan and the South China Sea to more consistently press its non-core sovereignty claims, such as those against India and Japan.”<sup>30</sup> In 2022, Oriana Skylar Mastro predicted there was a “100% chance of some sort of use of force” within five years.<sup>31</sup>

When the conventional wisdom does discuss economic or diplomatic issues, it is almost always in passing, and the focus is on reducing U.S. economic relations with the region and decoupling with China. Victor Cha examines China’s economic coercion and argues that “collective resilience is a peer competition strategy that promises a multilateral response in the trade space to the prospect of economic bullying by the Chinese government.”<sup>32</sup> Writing in early 2025, Economy and Melanie Hart argue that “Washington . . . is still competing with one hand tied behind its back. . . . It will take a full suite of economic incentives, public-private partnerships, and investment and trade deals to reduce the United States’ and its partners’ reliance on China.”<sup>33</sup> Former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson points out that “although many countries share Washington’s antipathy to China’s policies, practices, and conduct . . . even Washington’s closest strategic partners are not prepared to confront, attempt to contain, or economically de-integrate China as broadly as the United States is.”<sup>34</sup>

28. Susan M Gordon and Michael G. Mullen, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China*, Independent Task Force Report No. 81 (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), p. 50, <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-Relations-in-a-new-era>.

29. Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, “Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan,” *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Summer 2022), p. 39, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00437](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00437).

30. Elizabeth C. Economy, *The World According to China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 87.

31. Quoted in Melissa Morgan, “Understanding the Stakes in Taiwan,” Stanford University Center for International Security and Arms Control, November 4, 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/understanding-stakes-taiwan-0>.

32. Victor D. Cha, “Collective Resilience: Deterring China’s Weaponization of Economic Interdependence,” *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Summer 2023), pp. 91–94, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00465](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00465).

33. Elizabeth C. Economy and Melanie Hart, “America’s China Strategy Is Incomplete: Putting Beijing on the Back Foot Requires Economic Tools Beyond Tariffs,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 14, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-china-strategy-incomplete>.

34. Henry M. Paulson Jr., “America’s China Policy Is Not Working: The Dangers of a Broad De-

In sum, the conventional wisdom has converged on a view that China has expansive goals to dominate not just Asia but the world; ultimately, it seeks to supplant the United States as the global hegemon. This view also maintains that the best way for the United States to respond is to emphasize military solutions, deterrence, containment, and a wide coalition of anti-China alliances across East Asia.

We challenge this conventional wisdom.

### *China's Aims Are Unambiguous and Consistent—At Least in Words*

The mushrooming and widely circulated publications on Xi Jinping's remarks that serve as the official party line make it easier to assess China's intentions today compared with decades ago. China is not an enigma, and we need not speculate about what it prioritizes. China has established what it cares about in party documents, speeches, and policy statements to both domestic and international audiences. Although scholars disagree on whether the statements on China's intentions and strategic goals are formulaic language or ploys to appease its regional neighbors and the United States, it is imprudent to dismiss those statements and conclude that China is impossible to decipher. After all, as General Omar Bradley told the U.S. Congress in 1951, the United States' misperceptions about China's intentions and the dismissal of Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou En-lai's warnings before the outbreak of the Korean War cost both countries "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time and with the wrong enemy."<sup>35</sup>

This section provides qualitative assessments of Chinese rhetoric. Building on the approaches developed by Paul Godwin and Alice Miller,<sup>36</sup> Michael Swaine,<sup>37</sup> and Doshi,<sup>38</sup> we investigate the most authoritative Chinese official

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coupling," *Foreign Affairs*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/americas-china-policy-not-working>.

35. The Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations, *Military Situation in the Far East: Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations*, part 2, 82nd Cong. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 1951), p. 732, <http://archive.org/details/militarysituatio02unit>.

36. Paul H. Godwin and Alice L. Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA584671.pdf>.

37. Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 38 (August 2012), <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinese-leadership-and-elite-responses-us-pacific-pivot>.

38. Doshi, *The Long Game*, pp. 10, 42–43, 335–338.

sources that signal China's intentions. These sources include the *People's Daily*, *Qiushi*, and speeches made by top leaders (members of the Politburo Standing Committee, primarily Xi Jinping, Yang Jiechi, and Wang Yi). We then trace and interpret key discourses related to China's goals, its views of the United States, and its stance on multilateralism.

We examine China's ambitions through the lens of the "core interests" that it defines in official documents, including how these aims have evolved over time. We find that China has been stating its core interests unambiguously and coherently: domestic stability; sovereignty and territorial integrity; and social-economic development. It was only in 2009 that State Councillor Dai Bingguo formally proposed these three core interests for the first time at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue held in Washington, DC.<sup>39</sup> Dai further distilled this point in an article in December 2010.<sup>40</sup> Since then, however, despite being reprinted in official media such as Xinhua News Agency, these statements have been largely framed as his personal assessment.

China published its first official foreign policy White Paper, *China's Peaceful Development*, in September 2011. It explicitly stated China's core interests as being "state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development."<sup>41</sup> In other words, of three core interests, two are focused on internal, domestic priorities, and one is about how China engages with other countries on sovereignty issues.

The similarities and differences in how Dai and the official White Paper rank these core interests is informative. Although the White Paper suggests that economic development, internal political stability, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity are essential and mutually reinforcing,<sup>42</sup> Dai explicitly ranks the Chinese government's core interests in descending order: (1) internal political and regime stability; (2) national sovereignty and territorial integrity;

39. 侯远长、王增杰,“中国国家核心利益探析,”中州学刊 [Hou Yuanchang and Wang Zengjie, “An analysis of China's core national interests,” *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou*], No. 1 (2014), p. 16.

40. 戴秉国,“坚持走和平发展道路” [Dai Bingguo, “Adhere to the path of peaceful development”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, December 6, 2010, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/zt\\_674979/ywzt\\_675099/2011nzt\\_675363/jianchizouhepingfazhandaolu\\_675415/201012/t20101206\\_7956521.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/ywzt_675099/2011nzt_675363/jianchizouhepingfazhandaolu_675415/201012/t20101206_7956521.shtml).

41. 中国的和平发展 (北京: 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室, 2011) [The peaceful development of China (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011)], [https://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2011-09/06/content\\_1941258.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2011-09/06/content_1941258.htm).

42. Ibid.

and (3) sustainable economic development.<sup>43</sup> As Wang Gonglong notes, “In the eyes of China’s leaders, without political stability and institutional guarantees, and without sustainable economic and social development, the maintenance of national sovereignty, security, or territorial integrity and national unity can only be a castle in the air.”<sup>44</sup>

Some may argue that these statements were made before China’s “expansion” phase and Xi taking office in 2012. Yet thus far, Xi’s statements show little change in how China defines its core interests. For instance, in a speech in 2019, Xi named China’s three core interests as sovereignty, security, and development.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, when gauging intentions, two common pitfalls remain: First, leaders say things all the time that may not reflect their actual preferences. Second, it is impossible to know whether the stated goals are empty rhetoric.<sup>46</sup> Yet the timing of these Chinese statements is noteworthy. These were not just one-off, random comments—they were published repeatedly, before and after 2012. These statements were adopted as official party line in publications such as *The Governance of China* (a collection of Xi’s speeches and writing). Moreover, the Chinese Ministry of Education incorporated them into the national curriculum, from primary school to graduate programs.<sup>47</sup> In other words, whether the statements are sincere or cunning camouflage, repeating these statements to pupils in primary schools shows that they are what China wants its own people to believe.

What is largely absent in China’s writings about itself and its position in the world is almost any grandiose ambition to be a global or even regional

43. Dai, “Adhere to the path of peaceful development.”

44. 王公龙, “国家核心利益及其界定,” 上海行政学院学报 [Wang Gonglong, Core national interests and their definition, *Journal of Shanghai Administration Institute*], Vol. 12, No. 6 (November 2011), p. 77.

45. For example: “习近平阐明中国和平发展原则底线” [Xi Jinping clarifies China’s bottom line on peaceful development], Xinhua, January 30, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0130/c1001-20380658.html>; “习近平主持召开中央外事工作委员会第一次会议” [Xi Jinping presided over the first meeting of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission], Xinhua, May 15, 2018, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-05/15/content\\_5291161.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-05/15/content_5291161.htm); “习近平在省部级主要领导干部坚持底线思维着力防范化解重大风险专题研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话” [Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the opening ceremony of the seminar for provincial and ministerial level leading cadres on adhering to bottom-line thinking and focusing on preventing and defusing major risks], Xinhua, January 21, 2019, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-01/21/content\\_5359898.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-01/21/content_5359898.htm).

46. Sebastian Rosato, “The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Winter 2014/15), pp. 48–88, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00190](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00190).

47. “China Schools: ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ Introduced into Curriculum,” *BBC News*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58301575>.

leader. Terms such as “leader,” “hegemon,” and “indispensable nation” are not in Chinese discourse. This is in contrast to the United States, where it is relatively unquestioned that the country must be a global leader and a hegemon. For example, Xi’s speech on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the CCP on July 1, 2021 does not include any calls for China to be a global hegemon or for Chinese global leadership. The only time that foreign policy is mentioned, Xi said:

[W]e are also eager to learn what lessons we can from the achievements of other cultures, and welcome helpful suggestions and constructive criticism. We will not, however, accept sanctimonious preaching. . . . The Chinese nation does not carry aggressive or hegemonic traits in its genes. . . . The [Chinese Communist] Party cares about the future of humanity, and wishes to move forward in tandem with all progressive forces around the world. . . . The Party will continue to work with all peace-loving countries and peoples to promote the shared human values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom. . . . We will continue to champion cooperation over confrontation, to open up rather than closing our doors, and to focus on mutual benefits instead of zero-sum games. We will oppose hegemony and power politics, and strive to keep the wheels of history rolling toward bright horizons. . . . We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will.<sup>48</sup>

Although it is easy to dismiss Xi’s speech as cheap talk,<sup>49</sup> our point is that he does not aspire to hegemony.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Xi has explicitly said that China would “never become the hegemon” (中国永不称霸).<sup>51</sup> In contrast, U.S. rhetoric is re-

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48. Xi Jinping, “Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China,” Xinhua, July 1, 2021, CSIS Interpret: China, Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/speech-at-a-ceremony-marking-the-centenary-of-the-communist-party-of-china/>.

49. See, for example, Rosato, “The Inscrutable Intentions.”

50. Cheap talk is a concept from game theory, which holds that information transmission does not affect payoffs, and that players therefore do not have incentives to provide truthful information. This stands in contrast to costly signaling, where players use costly actions to reveal their true intent. For a review, see Joseph Farrell and Matthew Rabin, “Cheap Talk,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1996), pp. 103–118, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.10.3.103>. For arguments about cheap talk and costly signaling in international relations, see: James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 68–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002797041001004>; Kai Quek, “Four Costly Signaling Mechanisms,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (2021), pp. 537–549, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420001094>.

51. 吴绮敏, “习近平: 中国决不称霸扩张,” 人民日报 (海外版) [Wu Yimin, Xi Jinping: China will never seek hegemony or expansion, *People’s Daily* (overseas edition)], December 6, 2012, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1206/c49152-19811308.html>.

plete with claims that the United States is an indispensable nation and aspires to be a global hegemon and leader.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to imagine any U.S. leader echoing Xi's comments about learning from other countries and not seeking to pursue hegemony or bully other countries. President Barack Obama, for example, was vilified for stating that the United States could "lead from behind."<sup>53</sup>

Chinese rhetoric about China's goals is constrained and specific, not universalist or expansive. For example, the common phrase "Chinese characteristics" is more than a catchphrase—it indicates that China is focused mainly on itself, not other countries. This phrase explicitly restricts Chinese ambitions and ideas to China itself; it is specific, not general. "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" is very difficult to export overseas—this is ideology and practice focused on China's unique situation. China does not expect the Global South to mimic it or learn its ways, as these countries are culturally and politically different from China. It tends to engage the Global South economically but does not attempt to export its ideology or leadership. This absence of a universalist ideology also has deep historical roots in China.<sup>54</sup> As Kaiser Kuo puts it: "Chinese exceptionalism differs from the American version in at least one very important way. Whereas Americans see their values and institutions as possessing universal validity, the Chinese tend to see their values and institutions as particular to their nation—the product of China's unique history, geography, ecology, and society."<sup>55</sup>

The Chinese term for hegemony (霸权) is almost exclusively pejorative—it implies that the actor depends on power and is a bully, rather than implying justice and virtue. Its meaning is not nearly as benign or neutral as it is in

52. See, for example: Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>; Mitch McConnell, "The Price of American Retreat: Why Washington Must Reject Isolationism and Embrace Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/mitch-mcconnell-price-american-retreat-trump>.

53. James Jay Carafano, "Obama's 'Lead from Behind' Strategy Has U.S. in Full Retreat," Heritage Foundation, February 6, 2015, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/obamas-lead-behind-strategy-has-us-full-retreat>.

54. David Kang writes that premodern China "lacked a messianic vision of transforming the world . . . China had little interest in actively exporting its own ideals and values." David C. Kang, "Civilization and State Formation in the Shadow of China," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 91.

55. Kaiser Kuo, "High Stakes: Can American Exceptionalism Accommodate Chinese Exceptionalism in the 21st Century?," *Insight Magazine*, American Chamber of Commerce (Shanghai), January 22, 2025, <https://www.amcham-shanghai.org/en/article/insight-magazine-high-stakes-can-american-exceptionalism-accommodate-chinese-exceptionalism>.

English. The pejorative use of hegemony is also reflected in the notion of morality (德), as both power and morality are rooted in the Confucian idea of doing good for others. The Chinese terms for “morality” and “virtue” have always been synonymous with “power” and “efficacy.”

Another piece of evidence suggesting that China does not currently seek to replace the United States as a global leader comes from the CCP’s third and most recent historical resolution. Each of the three historical resolutions (三次历史决议文) has signaled a major turning point in the CCP’s political direction and priorities. Even in the latest one that was adopted in November 2021 under Xi Jinping’s consolidated leadership, the CCP’s priorities remain focused on domestic development and on territories that are largely internationally recognized as Chinese. This most recent resolution does not mention territorial expansion or regional or global hegemony.<sup>56</sup>

The first resolution, adopted in 1945, solidified Mao Zedong’s leadership and summarized the lessons learned from the party’s experiences from 1942 to 1945. The second resolution, issued in 1981 under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, assessed the errors of the Cultural Revolution and established the reform-oriented path of the four modernizations. The third resolution elevates Xi’s status, describing him as the “core, helmsman, and principal founder” of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” which it defines as “the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st century.”<sup>57</sup> On foreign affairs, the resolution reaffirms long-standing CCP positions. It stresses the need to resist “external pressure” on core sovereignty issues, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and maritime territories. It also reasserts that unification with Taiwan remains the party’s historical mission. These claims are all enduring concerns for China. Notably, there is no articulation of an ambition for global leadership or ideological dominance, underscoring continuity rather than expansionism in China’s strategic posture.

The Chinese government sets the tone (定调) on issues in general as well. For example, it labeled COVID-19 as a “people’s war” (人民战争) rather than as a disease outbreak or a pandemic.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, it did not describe pro-

56. 中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议 (北京: 中国共产党中央委员会, 2021) [Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the major achievements and historical experience of the party over the past century, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2021, [https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content\\_5651269.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm)].

57. Ibid.

58. 白皮书: 抗击新冠肺炎疫情的中国行动 (北京: 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室, 2020) [White paper: Fighting COVID-19: China in action (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, PRC,

democracy protests in Hong Kong in both 2014 and 2019 as unrest but as “color revolutions” (颜色革命) and “Western conspiracy” (西式阴谋).<sup>59</sup> Understanding how the CCP sets the tone of different issues is essential for understanding the party-state’s intentions and forecasting shifts in policy. As Joseph Fewsmith and his coauthors note, these public statements “conveyed the Party’s line—what the Party wanted Chinese citizens to understand about its approach to whatever issue at hand.”<sup>60</sup>

China’s official rhetoric toward the United States has shifted multiple times.<sup>61</sup> During the first three decades of the Cold War, driven by Communist ideology and a perception of threat, China consistently depicted the United States as “imperialist” (美帝). Most incidents involving the United States were attributed to U.S. imperialism.<sup>62</sup> Chinese official rhetoric became more cooperative after the 1970s, following Nixon’s visit to China, largely because of the more threatening presence of the Soviet Union. The tone became more positive from the 1990s to the first decade of the 2000s, with much of it emphasizing a “partner relationship” (伙伴关系) with the United States and other countries.<sup>63</sup> Yet in the most recent turn—which may be what has caused much

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June 7, 2020)], <http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzt/dtzt/2020/kjxgfyyqdzgxdbps/>. See also Jue Jiang, “A Question of Human Rights or Human Left? The ‘People’s War Against COVID-19’ Under the ‘Gridded Management’ System in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 31, No. 136 (2022), pp. 491–504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1985827>.

59. For example: 寒竹, “不能掉入‘颜色革命’陷阱” [Zhu Han, Don’t fall into the “color revolution” trap], *People’s Daily*, June 14, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/14/c\\_127913578.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/14/c_127913578.htm); “透过暴行我们看到了什么” [What we have observed through violence], *People’s Daily*, August 15, 2019, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbbhw/html/2019-08/15/content\\_1941535.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbbhw/html/2019-08/15/content_1941535.htm); 王喆, “专家告诉你,什么叫‘明显的’‘颜色革命’特征” [Wang Zhe, Expert explains what the “obvious characteristics of a ‘color revolution’ are”], *People’s Daily* online, August 13, 2019, <http://www.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0813/c32306-31293103.html>.

60. Joseph Fewsmith et al., *Studying China in the Absence of Access: Rediscovering a Lost Art* (Washington, DC: SAIS China Research Center, 2024), p. 23, [https://scgrc.sais.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/32026\\_JOHNS\\_HOPKINS.COVER\\_SP.pdf](https://scgrc.sais.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/32026_JOHNS_HOPKINS.COVER_SP.pdf). See also Howard Wang, *Political Discourse, Debate, and Decisionmaking in the Chinese Communist Party* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2025), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA3821-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3821-1.html).

61. For general discussion about how China has shifted its official rhetoric toward the United States, see 姚遥, 新中国对外宣传史: 建构现代中国的国际话语权 (北京: 清华大学出版社, 2014) [Yao Yao, *The History of New China’s External Propaganda: Constructing China’s International Discourse Power* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2014)], pp. 18–19, 61–75.

62. For empirical evidence of this claim, we consulted the *Jiefangjun Bao* (PLA Daily, 解放军报) Digital Archive, a key media outlet of the People’s Liberation Army. We analyzed articles published from 1956 to 1972. There were 37,181 mentions of “the United States” (美国), of which 23,072 (about 62 percent) also used the term “U.S. imperialist.” *Jiefangjun Bao* Digital Archive, <https://www.eastview.com/resources/gpa/jiefangjun-bao/>.

63. Yao, *The history of New China’s external propaganda*, pp. 72–73.

skepticism in the West—Xi started describing the relationship with the West as “the rise of the East and the decline of the West” (东升西降).<sup>64</sup>

But even with this change in rhetoric, foreign observers often ignore a subsequent sentence: “China has no intention . . . to replace the United States” (中国无意改变美国, 也不想取代美国).<sup>65</sup> This second concept, that China does not want to challenge the United States, has been the dominant narrative since at least the 1990s. China used the *People's Daily* to signal that “China does not want to replace or change the U.S.” a claim that it repeated publicly and regularly. In 2021, for example, Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said, “China's goal has never been to surpass or replace the United States or engage in zero-sum competition with the U.S. . . . Our goal is to constantly surpass ourselves, become a better China and enable the Chinese people to lead better lives.”<sup>66</sup>

We discuss both phrases (“rise of the East, decline of the West” and “no intention to replace the United States”) in the next section. We argue that Chinese rhetoric is restrained rather than expansive. China's aims—even as articulated by Xi—are constrained financially and ideologically, and there is little rhetoric indicating that China aims to displace the United States as a global hegemon. There is abundant evidence in Chinese writings to support our arguments.

### *Text Analysis of Chinese Rhetoric*

To avoid being selective in choosing texts to examine, we used simple quantitative methods to systematically assess and illustrate China's perception of power, its motives toward the United States, and its envisioned role on the international stage. In particular, we studied three key terms or phrases: “struggle,” “rise of the East, decline of the West,” and “no intention to replace the United States” as a global leader.

64. “新发展阶段新在哪里? 陈一新从八个方面进行阐释,” 新浪网 [What is new about the new development stage? Chen Yixin explains from eight aspects, *Sina*], January 15, 2021, <https://finance.sina.cn/china/gncj/2021-01-15/detail-ikftssan6460145.d.html>.

65. “美国挑起贸易战的实质是什么?” [What is the essence of the trade war provoked by the United States?], *People's Daily*, August 9, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-08/09/c\\_1123248025.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-08/09/c_1123248025.htm).

66. John Feng, “China Not Looking to ‘Surpass or Replace’ United States, Beijing Says,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-not-looking-surpass-replace-united-states-beijing-xi-jinping-1650234>.

## TEXT ANALYSIS OF “STRUGGLE”

We first identified 12,208 articles in *People’s Daily* from 2012 to 2024 containing the phrase “struggle” (斗争).<sup>67</sup> CCP propaganda frequently used this term, which holds deep ideological and strategic significance. As a Marxist principle, “struggle” is not merely a generic term but a core concept reflecting the CCP’s commitment to achieving and safeguarding its political, ideological, and economic goals. It is often used in public discourse to highlight critical missions and priorities, serving as a guiding framework for both domestic and international policies.

We then conducted a keyword search of these articles to examine a range of topics related to domestic issues and international relations (see online appendix 1). Doing so allowed us to map the CCP’s ideological underpinnings to specific policy areas, providing deeper insight into how “struggle” is operationalized across different domains. As shown in figures 1 and 2, the results reveal that the majority of articles mentioning “struggle” focus on domestic challenges (i.e., China’s economy and corruption) rather than on international relations. Throughout Xi’s regime from 2012 to 2024, about 68–85 percent of these articles addressed domestic issues (see figure 2).<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the data indicate that disputes regarding the East and South China Seas make up only a fraction of these articles on “struggles.” Indeed, the CCP prioritizes internal challenges and governance over external disputes, even in relation to its rhetoric of “struggle.”

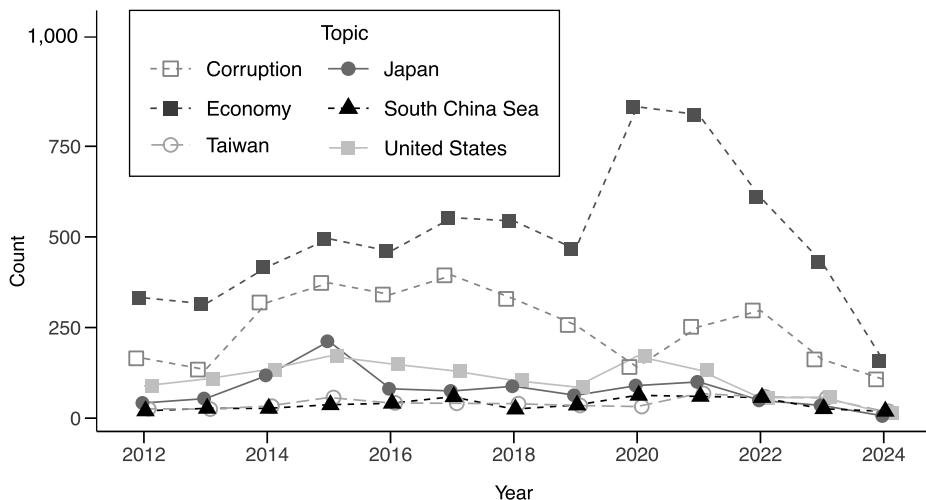
To validate the keyword search results, we trained a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model using the corpus of data containing all the articles mentioning “struggle.” LDA is a model used in natural language processing to automatically identify underlying topics within a collection of texts by grouping words that frequently appear together.<sup>69</sup> We classified the corpus into twenty topics. As shown in the online appendixes, all results remain

67. Data from Jackie Wong, “Forecasting the Use of Force: A Word Embedding Analysis of China’s Rhetoric and Military Escalations,” SSRN, September 11, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4809057>; Zenobia Chan, Noel Foster, and Jackie Wong, “Tying-Hands Versus Bluster: Authoritativeness, Words, and Deeds in Crisis Communication,” SSRN, September 27, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4970055>.

68. We removed references to COVID-19 at the suggestion of Victor Shih, who points out that COVID-19 was a temporary struggle posed by the pandemic. We are interested in the long-term usage of the terms in our study.

69. See Justin Grimmer, Margaret E. Roberts, and Brandon M. Stewart, *Text as Data: A New Framework for Machine Learning and the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), pp. 236–242.

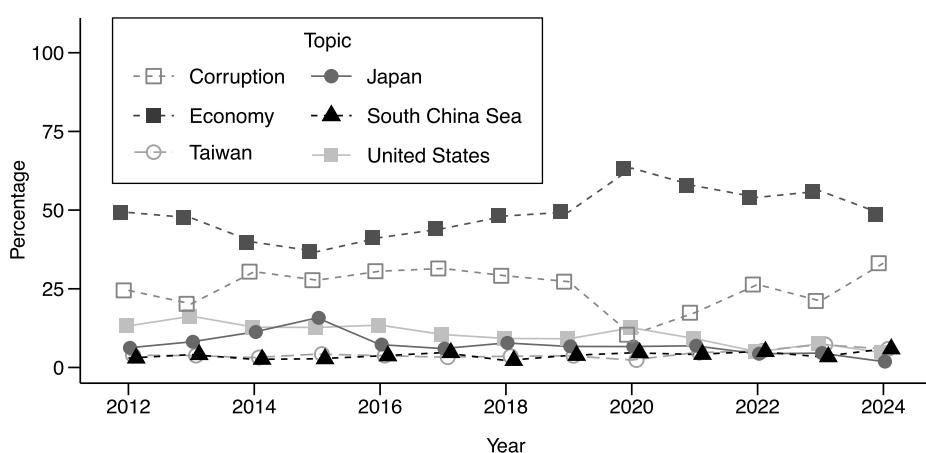
Figure 1. Number of *People's Daily* Articles on Various Topics Containing the Term "Struggle"



SOURCE: Jackie S. H. Wong, "Forecasting the Use of Force: A Word Embedding Analysis of China's Rhetoric and Military Escalations" (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

NOTE: The data for figures 1 and 2 are drawn from 12,208 articles. Domestic issues include the topics "Economy" and "Corruption."

Figure 2. Percentage of *People's Daily* Articles on Various Topics Containing the Term "Struggle"



SOURCE: Wong, "Forecasting the Use of Force."

consistent: The majority of the content is about domestic issues, not international politics.

#### TEXT ANALYSIS OF “RISE OF THE EAST, DECLINE OF THE WEST”

We next examine the key phrase “rise of the East, decline of the West” (东升西降), which has drawn significant attention from Western media and policymakers. The phrase is generally understood to reflect China’s perception that its own power (representing the East) is rising, and that traditional Western powers—primarily the United States—are in relative decline.<sup>70</sup> Since Xi assumed office in 2012, the phrase has appeared in only 32 articles in *People’s Daily*.<sup>71</sup> Gao Cheng first used the phrase in a 2013 op-ed in *People’s Daily*, in which he argued that the global financial crisis had shifted the balance of economic power: “After the financial crisis, the global economic power shifted with an ‘East rising, West declining’ trend. The economic strength of major developed countries suffered heavy damage during the crisis, while emerging market countries such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil became the engines of global economic recovery for the first time since the post-war period.”<sup>72</sup>

The term was used more frequently starting in 2021. Given China’s superior performance containing the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government argued that the crisis demonstrated the distinct advantages of China’s political system and institutions compared with those of Western countries. This phrase is largely used to justify the need to further strengthen state capacity to address developmental and domestic challenges, including the pandemic. As one article states, “The Party efficiently coordinated pandemic prevention efforts with economic and social development, continuously adjusting control measures based on changing circumstances. It resolutely won the battle against the pandemic, maximizing protection for people’s lives and health while minimizing the pandemic’s impact on economic and social development. In times of crisis, the Party has always remained the most reliable and steadfast pillar of support for the people.”<sup>73</sup>

70. 王缉思,“中美角力背后的四套逻辑,”清华大学战略与安全研究中心 [Wang Jisi, “Four logics behind U.S.-China rivalry,” Tsinghua University’s Center for International Security and Strategy], March 28, 2024, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zmgx/7026>.

71. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the content analysis, we also searched for the phrase “order in the East, chaos in the West” (东治西乱).

72. 高程,“金融危机让世界政治经济‘变脸’” [Gao Cheng, The financial crisis has changed the face of the world’s political economy], *People’s Daily*, September 17, 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0917/c83083-22943662.html>.

73. “什么是中国共产党,中国共产党干什么” [What is the Chinese Communist Party and what does

Perhaps the most authoritative source using these terms was Xi's internal speech in February 2023, which was later reprinted in *Qiushi* in December 2024. Xi used the term primarily to justify his policy agenda on China's modernization rather than to advocate for expansionism or to assert China's dominance in light of shifting geopolitical dynamics. Xi said:

The initial successful practice and remarkable achievements of Chinese modernization, along with the stark contrast between the “rise of the East and decline of the West” and the “governance of China versus disorder in the West” since the new era, have given many developing countries new hope and choices. . . . We neither intend to nor have plans to export Chinese modernization or the “China model,” but Chinese modernization has set an example for many developing countries to pursue modernization with independence and autonomy, and it will inevitably serve as a reference for some of them.<sup>74</sup>

Online appendix 2 presents the ten most recent (from June 2022 to January 2024) *People's Daily* articles containing the phrase “the rise of the East and decline of the West.” These articles consistently use the term to justify adhering to the party's and Xi's leadership or to support various policies. For example, this term is associated with the zero-tolerance COVID policy, China's model of modernization, and the need for deeper international cooperation. None of the articles frame the term in the context of geopolitical competition or expansionism.

#### TEXT ANALYSIS OF “NO INTENTION TO REPLACE THE UNITED STATES”

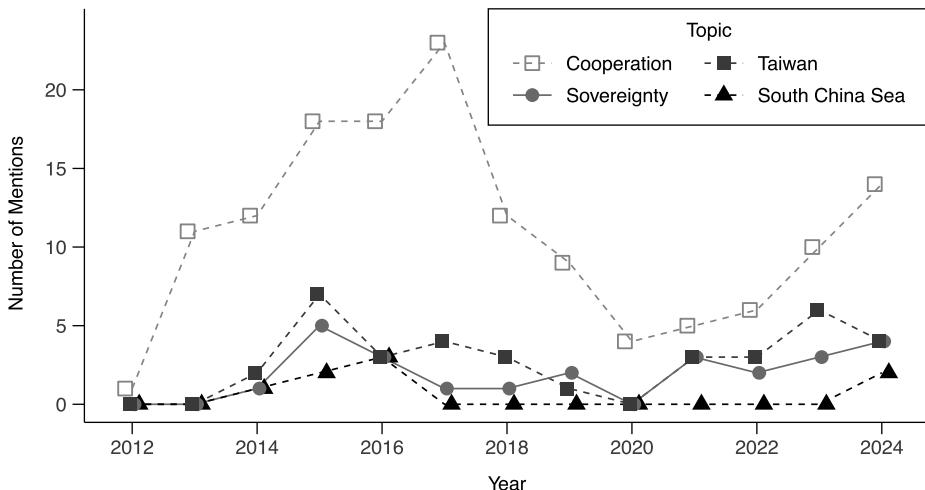
This section investigates whether China has the intention to replace the United States as a global leader. In addition to analyzing *People's Daily*, we collected 176 of Xi's speeches from 2012 to 2024 that include references to the United States. We sourced these speeches from the Xi Jinping's Series of Important Speeches Database (习近平系列重要讲话数据库).<sup>75</sup> Our close reading of the texts identified four major topics: “cooperation”; “Taiwan”; “sovereignty and internal politics”; and “South China Sea” (see figure 3). On-

it do?], *People's Daily*, June 29, 2022, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-06/29/content\\_5698472.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-06/29/content_5698472.htm).

74. 习近平,“以中国式现代化全面推进强国建设、民族复兴伟业,”求是 [Xi Jinping, Comprehensively promote the construction of a strong nation and the great cause of national rejuvenation with Chinese-style modernization, *Qiushil*], No. 1 (2025), p. 13.

75. 习近平系列重要讲话数据库 [Xi Jinping's series of important speeches database], <https://jhsjk.people.cn>.

Figure 3. Xi Jinping's Rhetoric in Speeches on the United States



SOURCE: Authors' compilation based on data from 习近平系列重要讲话数据库 [Xi Jinping's series of important speeches database], <https://jhsjk.people.cn/>.

NOTE: The data are derived from 176 speeches by Xi Jinping from 2012 to 2024.

line appendix 3 explains our coding criteria and provides examples of how we classified the speeches.<sup>76</sup>

As shown in figure 3, Xi's rhetoric in his 2012–2024 speeches on the United States consistently emphasized cooperation. Even when he addressed sensitive issues—such as U.S. intervention in China's internal affairs and disputes in the South China Sea—Xi's rhetoric focused heavily on dialogue and collaboration with the United States. Furthermore, Xi's speeches that emphasized cooperation with the United States consistently framed China's rise as peaceful and advocated for a positive-sum approach to the United States and global international relations. He repeatedly rejected the idea that China sought to challenge or replace the United States. For example:

Peaceful coexistence is a fundamental principle of international relations and the bottom line that both major powers, China and the United States, must adhere to. Viewing China, which is committed to peaceful development, as a

76. Speeches may have a different tone than state media. Chan, Foster, and Wong, "Tying-Hands Versus Bluster."

threat and pursuing a zero-sum game of “your loss is my gain, your rise is my decline” is a deviation from the right path. China has never bet on the failure of the United States, never interfered in its internal affairs, and has no intention of challenging or replacing it. Instead, China welcomes a confident, open, and prosperous America.<sup>77</sup>

Xi has also said that the Thucydides’s trap does not apply to U.S.-China relations, cautioning against fostering a new Cold War dynamic. During the 2024 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit with Biden, Xi emphasized the need for strategic clarity and cooperation and rejected zero-sum thinking, saying that China had no intention to compete with the United States. In his words, “First, there must be a correct strategic understanding. The ‘Thucydides Trap’ is not an inevitable fate of history. A ‘new Cold War’ should neither be fought nor can it be won. Containing China is unwise, undesirable, and ultimately doomed to fail. . . . Humanity is facing unprecedented challenges. Great power competition should not define this era; only through unity and cooperation can we overcome these difficult times together.”<sup>78</sup>

Wang Yi repeated the phrase “no intention to replace the United States” in a phone call with incoming Secretary of State Marco Rubio in January 2025. Although Wang reportedly used a subtle Chinese idiom, “act accordingly” (好自为之), to warn Rubio not to challenge China’s core interests, including Taiwan, he also emphasized, “We have no intention of surpassing or replacing anyone, but we must defend our legitimate right to development.”<sup>79</sup>

We supplemented our hand-coded results on Xi’s Chinese-language speeches in two ways. First, we conducted a sentence-level word co-occurrence network analysis of Xi’s speeches from 2012 to 2025 ( $N = 3,984$ ).<sup>80</sup> This computational text analysis technique identifies how words are used together to reveal thematic clusters within sentences. For example, if the term “struggle” frequently

77. “习近平在美国友好团体联合欢迎宴会上的演讲” [Xi Jinping’s speech at the U.S. friendly organizations joint welcome banquet], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, November 16, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zxw/202311/t20231116\\_11181541.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zxw/202311/t20231116_11181541.shtml).

78. “习近平同美国总统拜登在利马举行会晤” [Xi Jinping meets with U.S. President Biden in Lima], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, November 17, 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zxw/202411/t20241117\\_11527702.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zxw/202411/t20241117_11527702.shtml).

79. “王毅同美国国务卿鲁比奥通电话” [Wang Yi speaks with U.S. Secretary of State Rubio on the phone], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, January 24, 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202501/t20250124\\_11544828.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202501/t20250124_11544828.shtml).

80. For similar approaches, see Alix Rule, Jean-Philippe Cointet, and Peter S. Bearman, “Lexical Shifts, Substantive Changes, and Continuity in State of the Union Discourse, 1790–2014,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 112, No. 35 (2015), pp. 10837–10844, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1512221112>; see also Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart, *Text as Data*, p. 271.

appears alongside references to the United States, this may indicate that China emphasizes a conflictual relationship with the United States and potentially seeks to displace it (see online appendix 4). Second, to demonstrate that this rhetorical pattern is not confined to domestic Chinese audiences, we also performed a manual content analysis of English-language speeches ( $N = 114$ ). We present these results in online appendix 5. Across both analyses, the results consistently show that China emphasizes cooperating with the United States rather than displacing it.

In sum, quantitative analyses of some basic terms that appear in Chinese rhetoric reveal patterns over time that are different from what the conventional wisdom claims. These patterns show far more emphasis on domestic issues, little discussion of global domination, and consistent references to multilateral cooperation. They also show that China does not intend to challenge or displace the United States.

### *Trans-Dynastic China: China's Aims Are Inherited, Not New*

China's interests and most important goals are not only unambiguous but also trans-dynastic.<sup>81</sup> By "trans-dynastic," we mean that the PRC's main concerns—domestic, international, and territorial—date back to at least the nineteenth century during the Qing dynasty. Chief among these are China's centuries-old border concerns (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang). The PRC was not the first regime to make these claims.

Although it is sometimes depicted as a new, rising power in the scholarly literature, "a revitalized power" is probably a more accurate description of China in the twenty-first century. For example, Elizabeth Perry explains how cultural values have endured for two millennia and continue to influence and shape contemporary Chinese politics. In her words, "The first idea—that people have a just claim to a decent livelihood and that a state's legitimacy depends upon satisfying this claim . . . has roots in the teachings of Confucius (sixth–fifth century BC). . . . The idea that good governance rests upon guaranteeing the livelihood of ordinary people has been a hallmark of Chinese political philosophy and practice from Mencius to Mao—and beyond."<sup>82</sup> In that

81. Much of this section relies on David C. Kang, "Trans-Dynastic National Interests in East Asia: Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Founding of the Koryō Dynasty" (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

82. Elizabeth J. Perry, "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights,' from Mencius to Mao—and Now," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2008), pp. 38–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592708080055>.

way, the CCP has a set of historical and cultural resources to draw on that link contemporary China to a long and illustrious past.<sup>83</sup> But the contemporary Chinese government also has a set of concerns and priorities that are linked to that past.

China's overall concern with its territoriality and borders dates back to the early seventeenth century, long before the CCP's victory over the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949. The principal contemporary concern relates to Taiwan, but the sovereignty claims over Hong Kong and Macau have also been prominent. The Qing conquered some former Ming tributaries in northwestern China and Central Asia and reorganized them as new provinces (e.g., Qinghai and Xinjiang).<sup>84</sup> The Qing dynasty asserted control over Tibet in 1720 and kept it to the end of the dynasty. In contrast, control of the East and South China Seas has been comparatively less important to China.

All these issues of China's territorial integrity date from the tumultuous period of the nineteenth century or even earlier. The British seized control of Hong Kong in 1841, during the first Opium War. The United Kingdom established it as an official colony in 1843, and in 1997 Hong Kong returned to nominal Chinese control. Its near neighbor, Macau, under Portuguese control from the sixteenth century, returned to Chinese rule in 1999. Thus, from China's perspective, the "unequal treaty system" only ended fewer than thirty years ago.<sup>85</sup>

#### TAIWAN

Taiwan has been a central, trans-dynastic concern for China since at least the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This concern has persisted through the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the KMT, and the contemporary CCP. Liff and Ikenberry acknowledge that "China's vast claims over islands and features in the South and East China Seas predate its current 'rise' by decades. Yet as China's military capabilities grow, Beijing is increasingly capable of asserting these claims in a manner that it was unable to only a few years ago."<sup>86</sup> Although indigenous peoples had lived on the island for thousands of years, they never orga-

83. Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 2–3.

84. C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

85. Richard S. Horowitz, "The Opium Wars of 1839–1860," in Stephan Haggard and David C. Kang, eds., *East Asia in the World: Twelve Events That Shaped the Modern International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 186.

86. Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing Toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competi-

nized themselves into a political unit that could engage in or seek diplomatic recognition from China, Japan, Korea, or other countries that existed at the time. Taiwan was a frontier, not a border. There was no pre-Qing Taiwanese kingdom to conquer, as the island was never a tributary of any country.

In this way, incorporating Taiwan into “China proper” was a process of closing off a frontier area rather than conquering an existing political unit.<sup>87</sup> In contrast, Japan annexed the Ryukyu Islands in 1872, which had existed as an independent kingdom for centuries and had long-standing tribute relations with China, Japan, and Korea. Japan still controls these islands, which it renamed as Okinawa Prefecture.<sup>88</sup>

It was during the Qing dynasty that China first officially incorporated Taiwan into its governance structure. In the wake of the fall of the Ming dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century, pirate king and Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong created a base in Taiwan.<sup>89</sup> Zheng fought the Qing for decades, regularly conducting full-scale raids and battling the Qing along the Fujian coast. After the Qing destroyed the Zheng family regime in the late seventeenth century, the Qing established formal control over Taiwan, administering it as a prefecture of Fujian Province beginning in 1683. The Qing made Taiwan a separate province in 1886.

It is easy to dismiss Chinese discussions of a “century of humiliation” as outmoded and resolved. But China’s view is that Taiwan is Chinese. Japan annexed Taiwan in 1895 after the First Sino-Japanese War, and the Qing dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan under the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki. Li Hongzhang, the Qing dynasty’s ambassador plenipotentiary, pointed out the long-lasting implications of ceding Taiwan during the negotiation of the treaty:

The proposed treaty . . . contains provisions which, if insisted upon and enforced, will be the sure and fruitful source of complications which may be transmitted through many generations. . . . Territory long held by a nation, through many centuries and dynasties, becomes a priceless heritage. . . . This will be especially the case with that portion of territory [Taiwan] described in Clause (a) of this Article . . . because it takes from the present dynasty of China

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tion in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Fall 2014), p. 56, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00176](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00176).

87. M. Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 46–83, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228805775124534>.

88. Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999).

89. Tonio Andrade, “The Zheng State and the Fall of Dutch Formosa, 1662,” in Haggard and Kang, *East Asia in the World*, pp. 149–163.

a portion of its ancient possessions . . . [Japan] taking from him [the Qing emperor] a valuable portion of his ancestors' home.<sup>90</sup>

Taiwan remained under Japanese control as the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911, leading to a warlord era in China. In 1928, the KMT nominally reunified China under the Republic of China (ROC). The main Western powers, including the United States in 1928 and the United Kingdom in 1935, recognized the ROC as the legitimate ruler of all China. At the 1943 Cairo Conference, a joint declaration by ROC leader Chiang Kai-shek, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill specified that "all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa [i.e., Taiwan], and the Pescadores [Penghu Islands], shall be restored to the Republic of China."<sup>91</sup> When Japan surrendered in 1945, the ROC regained sovereignty over Taiwan in what is known as retrocession (光復), which means "honorably recovering lost territory."

When the KMT lost the civil war on the mainland, it fled to Taiwan while simultaneously claiming to be the legitimate ruler of all China. For its part, the CCP—newly in possession of the mainland—also claimed to be the legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan. At no time did either the KMT or the CCP view Taiwan as anything other than Chinese. This stalemate persists. The ROC and the PRC had agreed on the status of Taiwan until the first democratic elections in Taiwan in 1996, when a change in Taiwan's political status first became possible. But it is also clear that China has been concerned about Taiwan for well over a hundred years, long before it was concerned about contemporary conflicts over semiconductors or airfields.<sup>92</sup>

#### THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE NINE-DASH LINE

Some analysts suggest that disputes over maritime claims in the East and South China Seas may contribute to war or conflict in East Asia. Many believe that China is the cause of this instability, but this is not necessarily the

90. "日清讲和条约缔结一件:讲和条约" [Memorandum of the ambassador plenipotentiary of his imperial majesty the emperor of China in reply to the draft treaty proposed by the plenipotentiaries of his imperial majesty the emperor of Japan], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1895, Japanese Diplomatic Archives Digital Archive, Vol. 28.2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/about/hq/record/index.html>

91. Quoted in Shelley Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), p. 24.

92. The conventional wisdom in the United States emphasizes the contemporary practical, material, strategic, and instrumental advantages that China would gain from conquering Taiwan and tends to de-emphasize China's enduring concerns about territoriality and sovereignty. See, for example: Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, pp. 116–117; Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, pp. 129–130; Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong*, pp. 318–319.

case.<sup>93</sup> China's maritime claims are rooted in the chaos of the first half of the twentieth century. All of the East Asian disputes over national borders emerged in the wake of war, imperialism, state formation, and the new use of the Western legal and normative principles embodied in the Westphalian sovereign international order. Most critically, the Cairo Conference and the 1945 Potsdam Conference settled most territorial disputes about land, but they did not address the maritime borders of East Asia. The Potsdam Declaration, for example, specified that "Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and such minor islands as we determine," but it did not specify the details of maritime and island sovereignty.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, the disputes over the islands and the maritime borders have simmered for decades—essentially in perpetuity.<sup>95</sup>

The origins of the controversial "nine-dash line" are instructive.<sup>96</sup> The nine-dash line was originally an eleven-dash line that first appeared on an official ROC map entitled "Map Showing the Location of the Various Islands in the South Sea" that was published in 1948 by the ROC Ministry of the Interior.<sup>97</sup> The 1948 map reportedly originated in an earlier "Map of Chinese Islands in the South China Sea" (中國南海島嶼圖) that the ROC's Land and Water Maps Inspection Committee published in 1935. The two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin were removed in 1953, rendering it a nine-dash line.<sup>98</sup> Some interpret

93. Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Island Builders: The People's War at Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-04-09/chinas-island-builders>; Adam P. Liff, "Unambivalent Alignment: Japan's China Strategy, the US Alliance, and the 'Hedging' Fallacy," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 2019), pp. 453–491, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz015>.

94. Kimie Hara, "50 Years from San Francisco: Re-examining the Peace Treaty and Japan's Territorial Problems," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (2001), pp. 361–382, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3557753>.

95. Alexis Dudden, *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

96. M. Taylor Fravel and Charles L. Glaser, "How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?," *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Fall 2022), pp. 88–134, [https://doi.org/10.1163/isec\\_a\\_00443](https://doi.org/10.1163/isec_a_00443).

97. Boundary Department, Ministry of Interior, "Map Showing the Location of the Various Islands in the South Sea," Republic of China, 1948, cited in Codification Division, Office of Legal Affairs, "The South China Sea Arbitration Between the Republic of the Philippines and the PRC, Award of 12 July 2016," *Reports of International Arbitral Awards*, Vol. 33 (New York: United Nations, 2020), p. 251, [https://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol\\_XXXIII/153-617.pdf](https://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_XXXIII/153-617.pdf). Some scholars argue that the map was prepared in 1947 and published in 1948. See, for example, Zou Keyuan, "The Chinese Traditional Maritime Boundary Line in the South China Sea and Its Legal Consequences for the Resolution of the Dispute over the Spratly Islands," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 27–55, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157180899X00020>.

98. PCA Case No. 2013-19, Award in the Matter of the South China Sea Attribution Before an Arbitral Tribunal Constituted Under Annex VII to 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the

this removal as a gesture to improve diplomatic ties with North Vietnam.<sup>99</sup> China has had long-standing claims to these disputed maritime borders. The PRC inherited those claims. It did not create them.

On May 7, 2009, China submitted two notes verbales to the UN secretary-general in response to a joint submission by Malaysia and Vietnam on the preceding day to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. In its notes, China appended a map depicting the nine-dash line, which included the statement, "China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof."<sup>100</sup> As Julian Ku notes, "The nine-dash line was not controversial between 1949 and 2009 because no one ever spent time talking or thinking about it."<sup>101</sup> In fact, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen predictably criticized a 2016 Hague tribunal ruling that broadly rejected China's claims in the South China Sea. The day after the ruling, Tsai sent a Taiwanese warship through the South China Sea area that was under dispute: "The mission of this voyage is to display Taiwan people's resolve in defending the national interest. . . . [The ruling] 'gravely harmed' Taiwan's rights in the South China Sea."<sup>102</sup>

It is clear that China seeks to recover or preserve all these territories. China has publicly and formally rejected the use of force to settle some issues; for example, in joint communiqués with the Philippines, China has reiterated its intent to peacefully settle disputed claims in the Spratly Islands.<sup>103</sup> China is willing to compromise regarding the East and South China Seas. Yet Taiwan is China's core concern, for which compromise is not an option. Indeed, China

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Sea Between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China, The Hague, Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016, pp. 71–72, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/2086>.

99. Zhen-Gang Ji, "The South China Sea Island China Gave Away," *Diplomat*, August 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/the-south-china-sea-island-china-gave-away>.

100. Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, Note Verbale to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, No. CML/17/2009, May 7, 2009 (Annex 191), [https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mysvnm33\\_09/chn\\_2009re\\_mys\\_vnm\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf); Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, Note Verbale to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, No. CML/18/2009, May 7, 2009 (Annex 192), [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/vnm37\\_09/chn\\_2009re\\_vnm.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2009re_vnm.pdf).

101. Quoted in Steve Mollman, "The Line on a 70-Year-Old Map That Threatens to Set Off a War in East Asia," *Quartz*, July 7, 2016, <https://qz.com/705223/where-exactly-did-chinas-nine-dash-line-in-the-south-china-sea-come-from>.

102. Austin Ramzy, "Taiwan, After Rejecting South China Sea Decision, Sends Patrol Ship," *New York Times*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/world/asia/south-china-sea-taiwan.html>.

103. See online appendix 6 for details.

has done everything possible to make credible its threat to use force in order to stop Taiwan from declaring independence. China has consistently signaled its different intentions in these two areas.

#### TAIWAN'S MARITIME AND TERRITORIAL CLAIMS

Often overlooked is the fact that Taiwan makes the same—if not more aggressive—maritime and territorial claims as China. Taiwan's claims date back to the late 1920s, when the United States formally recognized the ROC as the legitimate government of China. In fact, Taiwan has fortified Itu Aba islet (Taiping in Chinese), 1,600 kilometers from Taiwan, which is the largest of the disputed Spratly Islands.

A long-running misunderstanding regarding the nine-dash line is that China has made explicit claims to the South China Sea as a whole. This confusion has been reflected in the U.S. Department of State paper on China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, which focuses on the coordinates of the dashes.<sup>104</sup> Yet China has neither clarified the title of rights within the nine-dash line nor claimed specific maritime rights by providing specific coordinate points.<sup>105</sup> It is China's ambiguous nine-dash line claim that drove the Philippines to initiate arbitration proceedings against China under Annex VII of UNCLOS on January 22, 2013. Yet as the UNCLOS Tribunal made clear, "As far as the Tribunal is aware, China has never expressly clarified the nature or scope of its claimed historic rights. Nor has it ever clarified its understanding of the meaning of the 'nine-dash line.'"<sup>106</sup>

Taiwan's claims about the nine-dash line are even more aggressive than the PRC's. In 1998, Taiwan published its first law on territorial seas (中華民國領海及鄰接區法 [Law of the Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and Adjacent Areas]) and announced that the Executive Yuan (行政院), Taiwan's highest administrative organ, would determine the baseline and boundary of the ROC's territorial sea.<sup>107</sup> In 1999, the Executive Yuan explicitly stated that Taiwan had sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, declaring

104. Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, *Limits in the Seas No. 150, People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/limits-in-the-seas>.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

106. PCA Case No. 2013-19, p. 71.

107. 中華民國領海及鄰接區法 (台北:中華民國內政部, 1998) [Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of the Republic of China (in Chinese)] (Taipei: Republic of China's Ministry of the Interior, 1998)], <https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcodes=A0000009>.

that “all the islands and reefs of the Spratlys within the country’s traditional U-shaped line” belong to Taiwan (see online appendix 6).<sup>108</sup> Although Taiwan modified some of its claims in 2009, its claims about the nine-dash line remained the same.<sup>109</sup> It is unlikely that China or Taiwan will resort to the use of military force to defend their (identical) claims about the nine-dash line. The difference is how the United States and other countries interpret or respond to each government’s claim.

In sum, China’s core interests are not new—many date back to at least the eighteenth century, as in the cases of Taiwan and Tibet. Although politically the United States may care more about China’s territorial claims than Taiwan’s territorial claims, they are identical. What China does not want is also clear: China has no interest in conquering Vietnam or any other country in Asia. Indeed, for centuries China has viewed Vietnam as a legitimate and important country to its south. As we show in the next section, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, China has not made and does not make any claims toward Vietnam.

### *China’s Aims Are Limited, Not Expanding*

China’s aims are not only unambiguous, trans-dynastic, and long-standing, they are also not increasing in scope. In fact, the PRC has resolved many of the issues that it inherited in 1949. At its apex, the Qing dynasty comprised 13 million square kilometers.<sup>110</sup> Today, the PRC is 9.42 million square kilometers. The PRC’s willingness to codify almost all of these borders is evidence of its view of the legitimate sovereignty of its counterpart states. In other words, the PRC is not making irredentist claims over almost 4 million square kilometers of territory. While the precise borders in East Asia have expanded and contracted over the centuries, China supports other countries’ right to exist and does not dispute their legitimacy. Gilbert Rozman notes that China’s view toward East Asia has been oriented toward maintaining stability rather than expanding:

108. 中華民國 88 年 2 月 10 日行政院台 88 內字第 0616 號令公告 (台北: 中華民國行政院, 1999) [*Announcement of the Executive Yuan Tai 88 Nei Zi No. 06161* (Taipei: Executive Yuan of the Republic of China, 1999)].

109. 中華民國 98 年 11 月 18 日行政院院臺建字第 0980097355 號令修正 (台北: 中華民國行政院, 2009) [*Amendment of the Executive Yuan Taijian Zi No. 0980097355* (Taipei: Executive Yuan of the Republic of China, 2009)].

110. Martina Siebert, Kai Jun Chen, and Dorothy Ko, “Introduction,” in Martina Siebert, Kai Jun Chen, and Dorothy Ko, eds., *Making the Palace Machine Work: Mobilizing People, Objects, and Nature in the Qing Empire* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), p. 23.

"It was common to identify greatness, the peak of the cycle, with China's ability to stabilize tributary relations with the peoples around its borders. In the absence of strong competing states, however, the Chinese empire tended to look inward."<sup>111</sup>

China has fewer territorial claims today than it did in the 1950s. Indeed, China participated in a spate of negotiations in the 1960s and the 1990s. As of 2025, the five remaining disputes pertain to the Indian border, Taiwan, the Paracel Islands, the Senkaku Islands, and the Spratly Islands.<sup>112</sup> Far from not doing anything when it was weak and doing a lot when it is strong, China's claims are the same today as they were in the mid-twentieth century when it was desperately poor.<sup>113</sup>

An instructive example is the negotiations between China and Vietnam over their territorial and maritime borders.<sup>114</sup> There is extensive evidence that contemporary China views Vietnam as a legitimate, long-established country that it has deep ties with. For the most part, China has not discussed wanting to occupy or conquer Vietnam. After China and Vietnam normalized their relationship in 1991, they resolved a number of their remaining border issues. They signed the bilateral Land Border Treaty (陆地边界条约) in 1999 and the Agreement on the Demarcation of Territorial Seas, Exclusive Economic Zones and Continental Shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin (中越关于两国在北部湾领海、专属经济区和大陆架的划界协定) in 2000. The former disputes over the land border and the maritime border in the Gulf of Tonkin were just as complicated as the two countries' remaining dispute in the South China Sea. China and Vietnam did not solve the "easier" issues first and put off the more difficult issues until later. The land border involved mountainous terrain that was not easily accessible, and local populations lived and worked on both sides of the eventual border.<sup>115</sup> The main issue regarding the Gulf of Tonkin was how to define the islands in accordance with UNCLOS. Reflecting the trans-

111. Gilbert Rozman, "China's Quest for Great Power Identity," *Orbis*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 383–402, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387\(99\)80078-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387(99)80078-7).

112. Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation."

113. According to widely accepted international relations theories, such as power transition theory and realism, states tend to expand their appetites as their power grows. See, for example: A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1996), pp. 235–260, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600958>.

114. See, for example, Xinru Ma and David C. Kang, "Why Vietnam Is Not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics of the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (November 2023), pp. 363–386, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.16>.

115. Ramses Amer, "Dispute Settlement and Conflict Management in the South China Sea: As-

dynastic nature of these issues, two key questions were how to honor the 1887 agreement between the Qing dynasty and France that established administrative control over the islands in the gulf, and how to resolve the issue of fishing. Neither the Qing dynasty nor France is still involved in Sino-Vietnamese relations today, of course. Relations between China and Vietnam have continued to improve over the years. The People's Liberation Army even marched in Hanoi's National Day parade in May 2025 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Vietnam that occurred in 1975. The remaining maritime dispute with China is under negotiation, and there is no indication that China is considering renegotiating or reneging on any of the previous agreements.

The China-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) negotiations over a code of conduct for behavior in the South China Sea are another example of how the states of the region are continuing to look for cooperative solutions, even as all sides reclaim land and fortify their islands. In his meeting with Philippine President Corazon Aquino in 1988, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping advocated a joint development approach, saying that the issue with territorial claims could be put aside.<sup>116</sup> Even though the Philippines brought a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, the two sides have continued to negotiate a series of statements and memoranda on joint exploration of the South China Sea (see online appendix 6). Among the twenty-nine memoranda promoting China-Philippines cooperation on various projects (e.g., infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and education), in 2018 the two states announced a memorandum of understanding on oil and gas development.<sup>117</sup> In August 2019, a joint steering committee established a Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea, which convened its sixth meeting in May 2021.

In sum, the disputes in the South China Seas are regional issues. No country, including China, has managed to resolve all its maritime disputes with any other country in the region. Our key point is that China has not increased its

sessing Progress and Challenges," in Tran Truong Thuy, ed., *The South China Sea: Towards a Region of Peace, Security, and Cooperation* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2011), pp. 245–268.

116. 白皮书:中国坚持通过谈判解决中国与菲律宾在南海的有关争议 (北京: 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室, 2016) [White paper: China insists on resolving disputes with the Philippines in the South China Sea through negotiations (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, PRC, 2016)], [https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-07/13/content\\_5090812.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-07/13/content_5090812.htm).

117. Jay Batongbacal, "A Closer Look at China's Proposal for Joint Exploration with the Philippines," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, November 21, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/closer-look-chinas-proposal-joint-exploration-with-philippines/>.

aims. The task for all claimants in the region is to find diplomatic ways to manage their interests.

Regarding Taiwan, many scholars view China's interest in claiming the island as merely a stepping stone for further expansionism.<sup>118</sup> Yet there is considerable evidence that no country in the region views China's aims this way. All ten member states of ASEAN, as well as ASEAN as a collective, have an explicit One-China policy that sees Taiwan and China as "Chinese." The most vivid evidence of this East Asian view of the "One China" policy came in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Some U.S. analysts and policymakers cheered Pelosi's visit as part of recent "noticeable changes" in official U.S. policy toward Taiwan.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast, East Asian leaders across the region quickly reaffirmed the One-China policy. Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Lê Thị Thu Hằng, said that "Việt Nam persists in implementing the 'One China' principle and hopes relevant parties exercise restraint, refrain from escalating the situation in the Taiwan Strait, and actively contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability, promoting cooperation and development of the region and the world."<sup>120</sup> Indonesia's Foreign Ministry released a statement that "calls on all parties to refrain from provocative actions . . . [Indonesia] continues to respect the One China policy."<sup>121</sup> According to the Thailand Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Tanee Sangrat, "Thailand stands by the 'One China' policy. We do not wish to see any actions that would aggravate tensions and undermine peace and stability in the region."<sup>122</sup> Other countries that explicitly reiterated their support for the One China policy following Pelosi's visit included ASEAN

118. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, pp. 116–117; Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, p. 129; Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong*, pp. 318–319.

119. Daniel Twining and J. Michael Cole, "The Lesson of Pelosi's Trip: Don't Be Afraid of Engaging Taiwan," *National Review*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/08/the-lesson-of-pelosis-trip-dont-be-afraid-of-engaging-taiwan/>. For example, the first Trump administration hosted Taiwan's diplomats at the State Department and in other federal government buildings, and the Biden administration invited Taiwan to participate in its Summit for Democracy. Quoted in David Sacks, "How to Survive the Next Taiwan Strait Crisis: Washington Must Be Ready for a Showdown With or Without a Pelosi Trip," *Foreign Affairs*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-survive-next-taiwan-strait-crisis>.

120. "Việt Nam Calls for Restraint from All Parties in Taiwan Situation: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson," *Việt Nam News*, August 3, 2022, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1273941/viet-nam-calls-for-restraint-from-all-parties-in-taiwan-situation-foreign-ministry-spokesperson.html>.

121. Yvette Tanamal, "Indonesia Calls for De-escalation After Pelosi's Taiwan Visit," *Jakarta Post*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/08/03/indonesia-calls-for-de-escalation-after-pelosis-taiwan-visit.html>.

122. "Thailand Calls for Restraint amid Tensions in Taiwan Strait," *Nation Thailand*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/40018485>.

as a group, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore.<sup>123</sup> When South Korean president Yoon Seok-yeol's top national security adviser was asked in summer 2023 whether Korea still adhered to its One China policy, he replied, "We made our policy towards China when we normalized relations in 1992, and we haven't changed that policy. We won't reiterate it every time China wants us too, however."<sup>124</sup>

Although the conventional wisdom in the United States views the defense of Taiwan as a key element to contain China, almost no country in the region would involve itself in such a war. States in East Asia view the question of Taiwan as a Chinese issue for Chinese people, broadly defined, to resolve. Most publics and elites in East Asia believe that China is concerned about Taiwan because it relates to enduring issues of identity, not because it is economically valuable. East Asian states do not view China's claims over Taiwan as portending an increased Chinese appetite for territory. In fact, countries in the region reject Todd Sechser's "salami slicing" explanation for why a state might contest small claims made today because conceding today might lead to bigger claims tomorrow.<sup>125</sup>

### Conclusion

Understanding what China wants is central to being able to craft a successful and enduring policy for interacting with China and the East Asian region as a whole. The current conventional wisdom in the United States among both policymakers and scholars is pessimistic about China. In this view, China is territorially ambitious and economically threatening. Yet many of these claims rely on evidence that is not fully convincing. A careful review of the evidence leads us to conclude that China is focused primarily on regime security (e.g., domestic stability, as well as sovereignty and territorial integrity) and social-economic development. China is far from being a revisionist and ambitious power, and its interests are unambiguous, enduring, and limited.

The most important implication that arises from our research is that there is

123. "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Cross Strait Development," Association of Southeast Asian Nations, August 3, 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/final-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-on-Cross-strait-development.pdf>.

124. Author interview with a South Korean official at the Yongsan Presidential Office, Seoul, South Korea, July 3, 2023.

125. Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 627–660, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831000214>.

no need for a hostile U.S. military posture in the Pacific. China and the United States have much to negotiate—it can be difficult to work with Chinese firms, the Chinese government can be pushy and stubborn, and U.S. and Chinese interests may not align on many issues of importance to both countries. Yet this is the normal state of affairs in world politics, and none of this push and pull requires a generations-long U.S. focus on war-fighting, deterrence, and economic decoupling. Indeed, the focus on war-fighting is detrimental to resolving many of the diplomatic, economic, and social high-stakes issues that face both countries. It is hard to imagine a military solution for human rights, democracy, climate change, or immigration.

A second implication of our research is that there is ample room for China and the United States to cooperate on vitally important issues, such as: addressing climate change; transitioning to renewable energy; reducing pollution; and preparing for pandemics. For example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Brookings Institution launched a project to explore possibilities for cooperation. According to the chair of the project's advisory council, "game-changing opportunities for social impact across health, climate change, and food security are within reach, but they will depend on new mechanisms and narratives that enable collaborations between partners in the United States and China."<sup>126</sup> Thus, there is some openness in the United States to explore cooperation, but it is overshadowed by the conventional wisdom's focus on containing China. As Colby writes, "Readers will not find here any discussion of how to compete with China economically."<sup>127</sup>

Finally, the conventional policy prescriptions for the United States to decouple from China and contain China economically are especially troubling for two reasons. First, China's economy is far more resilient and innovative than many believe. Second, there are multiple robust initiatives across East Asia that focus on trade and diplomacy, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and ASEAN. Signed in 2018, CPTPP is a trade agreement with eleven current signatories, and nine coun-

126. Steve Davis, *Finding Safe Harbors for Development Impact: Navigating U.S.-China Stormy Waters for the Global Public Good* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/finding-safe-harbors-development-impact-navigating-us-china-stormy-waters-global-public>. See also Michael Schuman and David O. Shullman, *Cooperation with China: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/cooperation-with-china-challenges-and-opportunities/>.

127. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, p. xii.

tries have either applied to join or are considering applying.<sup>128</sup> The RCEP was signed in 2020. It is a free trade agreement between the ten member states of ASEAN and five partners. The United States does not participate in any of these initiatives. If the United States wants to remain a regional and global leader, then it would presumably join and participate in regional and global governance rather than back away from doing so. The Trump tariffs of early 2025, while extreme, were consistent with the conventional wisdom about decoupling from China. Even as Trump has reduced the overall tariffs, they remain far higher than even a few years before, and it is likely that Trump will raise tariffs again in the future.

Yet given China's astonishingly rapid pace of innovating and catching up to the United States, trade barriers may not be the best long-term grand strategy. Space does not permit an in-depth discussion of the political economy of China's growth and U.S. foreign economic policy. Trade restrictions and tariffs appear to be the default view of the second Trump administration, at least for now. These actions are a major mistake as East Asian countries increase their interactions with China. In the wake of Trump's tariff announcements of March 2025, for example, Xi Jinping announced that he would visit Vietnam at the invitation of Vietnam; Japan, Korea, and China held their first trilateral summit in over five years and announced further talks to explore the possibility of a free-trade area between the three giant economies. By misunderstanding what China wants, the United States risks creating problems where none exist and isolating itself from East Asia in ways that are deleterious to U.S. long-term national interests.

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128. Those considering joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership are China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay.