

## **China's Assertiveness and the Indo-Pacific Response: Australia's Strategic Calculus**

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### **Abstract**

After decades of economic success and relative political stability at home, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has become confident in its governance model, particularly in the wake of its successful navigation of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The Party's growing confidence in China's rise and its grip on power has fuelled a more assertive foreign policy on the global stage. This article contends that China's global assertiveness – as experienced and responded by Australia – if taken too far, could ultimately weaken the Party at home. This is because the Party's economic successes have been a result of the PRC's successful integration into the world economy and maintenance of harmonious trade relations with the world's major economies.

**Keywords:** *CPC Legitimacy, China Dream, Indo-Pacific, Statecraft, Wolf-Warrior*

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## 1. Introduction

Both the Chinese and the global population have benefited from the socialist state-directed market capitalism created by Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies from the late 1970s. Some 40 years of reform may have granted China the largest foreign policy capacity in the world. The relative size of China's economy – related to the size of the country itself – also lends the CPC the longevity, resilience, and strength that communist parties elsewhere have not enjoyed. Of the fifteen Soviet Republics and twelve pro-Soviet states that set out on the socialist path behind Russia from 1917, only five remain: the small powers of Cuba and Laos, and the middle powers of North Korea and Vietnam (Lowy Institute, 2022a; Malpass, 2021; Strauss, 2021). China is the only Communist Party-led great power and the most developed communist state in history (Lowy Institute, 2022a).

After decades of economic success and relative political stability at home, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has become confident in its governance model, particularly in the wake of its successful navigation of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The Party's growing confidence in China's rise and its grip on power has fuelled a more assertive foreign policy on the global stage. This article contends that China's global assertiveness, if taken too far, could ultimately weaken the Party at home. This is because the Party's economic successes have been a result of the PRC's successful integration into the world economy and maintenance of harmonious trade relations with the world's major economies. According to some analysts, foreign policy overassertiveness is already harming China's economic interests (Shirk, 2022). A prominent example is the US law that limits China's access to the most advanced semiconductors and chip-making technology (Bureau of Industry and Security, 2022).

This paper adopts a qualitative methodological framework, drawing on historical analysis, comparative policy review across economic, security, and governance domains, and illustrative case studies. The research is grounded in the examination of official statements, historical documents, and secondary analyses. This approach enables a substantive understanding of the evolving policy landscape and its broader implications. The first section of the article reviews the overall development of China's foreign policy from Mao Zedong to the Hu Jintao era. It suggests that, after attempting to export communism in the early days while adopting a generally isolationist foreign policy, during the first 30 years of economic reform, China pursued

a low profile in foreign policy and actively and peacefully sought to engage with the liberal democratic world, benefitting both economically and diplomatically. The second section examines the assertive shift in foreign policy under Xi Jinping. Finally, we assess the risks of Xi's assertive foreign policy approach. We argue that in creating more external enemies and hampering domestic economic growth, China's international actions have the potential to erode the Party's power base at home.

## **2. Development of CPC's Foreign Policy**

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the socialist state established Marxist theory as the enduring basis for Chinese international relations (BBC, 2021; Cheng, 2018). During Mao's rule, foreign policy was constrained by the lack of economic capacity. The Chinese military confronted the United States and United Nations in Korea, albeit reluctantly: by naming its forces there "volunteers", the PRC avoided directly declaring war on the United States. The PLA moved into Tibet (which the CPC insisted was part of China despite its complex history), and annexed part of Kashmir. It conceptualised international relations as between political parties as much as between sovereign states. The Central Committee's International Department maintained relations with and supported foreign communist parties, primarily within the Soviet bloc and via the Comintern, but also non-governing parties in countries including Malaysia (Ping, 2017). China also pursued a policy of military aggression to support "revolutionary peoples" against, in particular, the imperialism of the United States, which it labelled "hegemonism" (Yong & Pauly, 2013). The PRC was thus mostly alienated from the Western world during the Cold War.

## **3. The Open-Door Policy**

Mao's foreign policy was mostly overturned by Deng Xiaoping and his successors, who adopted a more cautious approach. Deng was more of a pragmatist than ideologue and was willing to experiment with market reforms if the reforms delivered results. Deng looked abroad for lessons in how to advance economic growth and learned much from the experience of Japan and the East Asian Tiger economies. In foreign affairs, Deng advocated the "keeping a low profile" (韬光养晦 *taoguang yanghui*) strategy. This strategy allowed the State to focus on domestic economic development,

while minimising international confrontation (and the resources needed to maintain a confrontational posture) (Dai, 2010; Wang, 2011). In foreign policy, Deng showed a willingness to compromise to create an “auspicious environment for China’s economic development” (Hu, 2022; Shirk, 2022). Deng reengaged with the United States very early on – bilateral relations were normalised on 1 January 1979 – and pushed China towards cooperation and trade with Western corporations. He shifted the narrative on the Taiwan issue from “liberation and reoccupation” to “peaceful unification”, indicating that the PRC was prepared to take a gradual approach. Deng also introduced the formula of “one country, two systems” to address fears in Taiwan and Hong Kong of communist-style rule in the territories, and with regard to unresolved territorial issues in the South China Sea, advanced the principle of “setting aside differences and pursuing joint development”. These low-key but pragmatic approaches indicated that, while Deng was “as determined as any Chinese leader to bring these lost territories back into the fold, yet he was willing to compromise to achieve broader goals” (Shirk, 2022).

The open-door policy benefited China. First, it created a successful foundation for socialist state-directed market capitalism. The CPC increased international engagement during the first decades of economic reform, including accelerating cross-border movements of people and ideas, embracing closer ties with its Asian neighbours, and encouraging foreign direct investment. By interacting with the global liberal economy, Chinese policymakers were able to seek out and learn from other countries’ policies and tailor them to China’s distinctive situation. For example, after studying Japan’s rapid post-war economic growth, the CPC encouraged the expansion of private sector and restructured State-owned enterprises (SOEs). China’s fiscal reforms in the 1980s empowered local governments to act as entrepreneurial entities, fostering a system of local State corporatism that incentivised industrial growth and blurred the lines between State and enterprise (Oi, 1992). This decentralised economic dynamism laid the groundwork for broader market reforms and positioned China to benefit from global integration. China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 marked a pivotal shift, as Lardy (2001) argues, committing the country to deeper liberalisation and aligning its domestic institutions with international trade norms. Later, its own economic miracle became a model for other developing countries, especially those whose authoritarian leaders preferred it to democracy-based paradigms. The 2008/2009 Global Financial

Crisis, which challenged the notion of the superiority of the neoliberal economic model, helped to boost the so-called “Beijing consensus” (Ramo, 2004), which further raised Beijing’s international status.

Second, the open-door policy offered multinationals an unprecedented opportunity to expand into the world’s largest single-country market, which reached 1.1 billion people by 1989 and 1.4 billion people in 2019 (Shen & Mantzopoulos, 2013). Most foreign multinational corporations initially engaged with China by using its people as a source of low-cost labour. By the mid-2000s, China had become the largest producer of steel, responsible for one-third of world production (Shirk, 2007). As the world’s factory, China was also the leading manufacturer of photocopiers, microwave ovens, DVD players, and shoes, and later became the leading manufacturer of telecommunication products such as mobile telephones, laptop computers, and digital cameras (Shirk, 2007). Foreign firms establishing plants also contributed to significant growth in China’s research and development capacity, particularly in biotech and telecommunications. From 2002 to 2006, the total number of foreign-invested research and development centres in the country increased from 200 to 750 (Shirk, 2007). Some of the technological investment proved useful in building up China’s military strength. Chinese consumers, meanwhile, used some of their increased spending power on luxury imports, including foreign cars, jewellery, cosmetics, and high-tech products. Interaction with the outside world was looking like a win-win situation for Chinese people and foreign companies.

Finally, and most importantly, the open-door policy helped to sustain the Party’s legitimacy. Market mechanisms helped the CPC “deal with the inefficiencies of allocation and distribution that occur with the central planning system” that had previously been central to CPC economic policy (Saich, 2001). The economic reforms enabled the country to put the devastation of the Cultural Revolution behind it by mobilising its people to focus on activities that would both grow the economy and better their own standard of living. From 1979 to 2006, the reforms resulted in 400 million people lifting themselves out of poverty. The percentage of underweight children halved, and the survival rate rose for children under the age of five (Shirk, 2007). As more and more people went from being able to meet their basic needs to “achieving a middle-class living standard” (State Council, 1991), the Party took the credit and gained credibility. In other words, the economic reforms enabled the Party to rebuild trust with its people.

#### 4. Peaceful Development

Beginning in the late 1990s, and especially following the Global Financial Crisis, China emerged as a great economic power. In 2010, the size of its economy surpassed that of all European economies as well as that of Japan and India to come second behind that of the United States. As its interactions with the outside world grew, however, some countries began to perceive China as a threat to regional security and the international rules-based order (Christensen, 2002, 2006; Pablo-Baviera, 2002). However, Beijing continued to flex its rising power cautiously; it had not yet abandoned Deng's policy of keeping a low profile in international affairs.

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, who was elected Party General Secretary in 2002, the CPC proposed the political slogan of “peaceful development” (和平发展 *heping fazhan*). This phrase is derived from the concept of “peaceful rise” (和平崛起 *heping jueqi*), which had been proposed by Zheng Bijian, the former Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department in 2004 (Zheng, 2004; Joske, 2022). It suggested that, while China was becoming a global economic power, it did not intend to become a hegemonic one. Instead, it would become a cooperative and responsible great power. China's foreign policy under Hu Jintao mostly chimed with the strategy proposed by Deng and adhered to by Hu's predecessor Jiang Zemin of “keeping a low profile” and minimising confrontation with other countries. This also avoided the risk of taking on too heavy international obligations and commitments that would hamper China's growth and development (Sutter, 2010).

At the same time, because growth in national power allowed China to be more involved in international affairs, the PRC engaged with the Western liberal world more actively (Johnston, 2008; Kent, 2002, 2007), especially in ways that allowed it to portray itself as a “responsible great power”. After more than twenty years of negotiation, the PRC joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. It signed the Declaration of Code of Conduct on the South China Sea in 2002. For the first time, the PLA Navy conducted overseas missions, taking part in anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 and providing escorts for both Chinese and foreign cargo ships.

In summary, China's foreign policy remained generally moderate and cooperative prior to 2012. The economic reforms, meanwhile, allowed China to gain the necessary experience, resources, and capital to continue growing economically at an impressive rate. Its moderate approach fostered active

engagement and close interaction with the outside world and proved both successful and beneficial both domestically and globally.

## **5. A More Assertive Foreign Policy under Xi**

China's foreign policy was already beginning to shift when Xi Jinping was announced as the new CPC General Secretary on 15 November 2012. Xi espoused confidence in China's model of governance as equal or superior to Western liberal democracy. Xi has since declared that he is leading a new era in which the country will become "prosperous and strong" (富强 *fuqiang*) (Fewsmith, 2013; Xi, 2014a). Xi promised the Chinese people that the Party would restore China's great power status as part of the goal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴 *zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) (Xi, n.d.). Xi Jinping's "new 'historical outlook' hinges on an idealistic (and not historically accurate) idea of cultural homogeneity, unity, and continuity". Xi embraces a Chinese model for human advancement, which he now calls "Chinese-style modernisation" (Xi, 2022). Xi has also warned those who would stand in China's way. As Xi declared in a speech celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the Party in 2021:

*Only socialism can save China, and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China ... we will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China. Anyone who dares try to do that will have their heads bashed bloody against the Great Wall of Steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people (BBC, 2021).*

## **6. Economic Coercion and Statecraft**

China's reforms transformed its economy in a little over 30 years. As mentioned above, it is now the second largest economy, just behind the United States. While strengthening the CPC's power domestically, it also enables the Party to use economic power to achieve geopolitical goals. The clearest evidence of CPC foreign policy overassertiveness is in its relations with its immediate or economically interdependent neighbours. The style of diplomacy nicknamed "wolf warrior" in 2020, but which began far earlier as the below examples demonstrate, employs in foreign relations the kind of rhetoric and aggression that the CPC typically aims towards its domestic enemies – insulting, hectoring, tyrannical – along with demands that,

essentially, ask foreign countries to abandon their own self-interest for that of the PRC.

## **7. Australia's Experiences**

There are numerous examples of coercion in the economic sphere. One that has been widely discussed is the sanctions towards Australia from 2020. In 2014, the two countries concluded a historic free trade deal to be enacted in 2015 and agreed to elevate the relationship to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”. President Xi Jinping addressed a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament, where he spoke of his own experiences of Australian goodwill, understanding, friendship, and commitment. He stated: “China needs peace. A harmonious and stable domestic environment and a peaceful international environment are what China needs most” (Parliament of Australia, 2014). However, for various reasons, tensions rose over the next six years, and Australia–China relations reached a crisis point in 2020 after Canberra called for an independent investigation of COVID-19’s origins.

Then, over the next three years, the PRC announced various measures or disputes (including over packaging, for example) that effectively restricted or banned imports of Australian barley, beef, lamb, wine, cotton, lobsters, timber, and coal. On 17 November 2020, the PRC Embassy in Canberra issued an extraordinary dossier of fourteen “grievances” to Australian journalists (Figure 1). It listed economic grievances alongside political ones. For instance, it complained about decisions by the Australian government to bar certain Chinese investments in Australia and Huawei from the 5G network, blocked Chinese investment projects for “unfounded national security concerns” – but combined these with gripes about negative reporting on Chinese issues, “wanton interference” in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan affairs, and other political issues. As shown, the PRC Embassy attempted to politicise Australia’s economic decision, making them even less likely to be addressed. With respect to the bans and the grievances, CPC’s foreign policy overassertiveness may be described as hegemonism: aggression against a weaker state (Yong & Pauly, 2013).

**Figure 1: Extract from the Dossier of Fourteen “Grievances” Presented by the Chinese Embassy in Canberra**

- foreign investment decisions, with acquisitions blocked on opaque national security grounds in contravention of ChAFTA/since 2018, more than 10 Chinese investment projects have been rejected by Australia, citing ambiguous and unfounded “national security concerns” and putting restrictions in areas like infrastructure, agriculture and animal husbandry.
- the decision banning Huawei Technologies and ZTE from the 5G network, over unfounded national security concerns, doing the bidding of the US by lobbying other countries
- foreign interference legislation, viewed as targeting China and in the absence of any evidence.
- politicization and stigmatization of the normal exchanges and cooperation between China and Australia and creating barriers and imposing restrictions, including the revoke of visas for Chinese scholars.
- call for an international independent inquiry into the COVID-19 virus, acted as a political manipulation echoing the US attack on China
- the incessant wanton interference in China’s Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan affairs; spearheading the crusade against China in certain multilateral forums
- the first non-littoral country to make a statement on the South China Sea to the United Nations
- siding with the US’ anti-China campaign and spreading disinformation imported from the US around China’s efforts of containing COVID-19.
- the latest legislation to scrutinize agreements with a foreign government targeting towards China and aiming to torpedo the Victorian participation in B&R
- provided funding to anti-China think tank for spreading untrue reports, peddling lies around Xinjiang and so-called China infiltration aimed at manipulating public opinion against China
- the early dawn search and reckless seizure of Chinese journalists’ homes and properties without any charges and giving any explanations
- thinly veiled allegations against China on cyberattacks without any evidence
- outrageous condemnation of the governing party of China by MPs and racist attacks against Chinese or Asian people.
- an unfriendly or antagonistic report on China by media, poisoning the atmosphere of bilateral relations”

Source: Kearsley et al. (2020)

However, such an attempt resulted in backlash. The PRC has a growing bad reputation among Australians. The Australian Ambassador to the PRC, Graham Fletcher, warned the Australia China Business Council in 2021 that the PRC is “unreliable as a trading partner and even vindictive” (Dziedzic, 2021). As a result, some Chinese companies find it difficult to do business in Australia, as people are increasingly concerned about their potential interference in Australian politics (Lowy Institute, 2022b). More importantly, the CPC was acting against its own economic requirements and interests. These restrictive trade measures have left Chinese people and industry at

home with higher prices and lower-quality goods as a result of the ban on Australian exports. In contrast, the Australian economy was not significantly affected because goods flowed to other consumers in the global liberal market (Tan & Chen, 2021). In other words, economic coercion towards Australia does more harm than good for China.

China's strategic use of import refusals also serves as a subtle yet potent form of economic coercion, punishing countries that act against its political interests under the guise of regulatory enforcement. As Kim *et al.* (2025) demonstrate, these refusals are not merely technical decisions but calculated sanctions that align with Lampton's (2008) framework of Chinese power—particularly the “money” dimension, where market access becomes leverage. By embedding political motives within ambiguous trade practices, China effectively blends its “might,” “money,” and “minds” to influence international behaviour while maintaining plausible deniability.

Beijing's economic statecraft is not limited to coercion and sanctions at the national level, but also indirectly through Chinese companies. Shifting from State capitalism to party-state capitalism, the CPC may task Chinese multinationals active in the global market, especially state-owned enterprises with political obligations (Pearson *et al.*, 2022). In such cases, they are not independent actors providing profits for investors and goods and services for consumers while responding to the price mechanisms of a rules-based global liberal market (Blanchette, 2021; McGregor, 2010). Among Chinese multinationals active in the global markets are financial corporations such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (now the world's largest corporation), China Construction Bank, Ping An Insurance Group, Agricultural Bank of China, and the Bank of China, all of which rank in the top twenty largest global companies. China also has global corporate reach in technology and energy with companies including Alibaba Group, Tencent Holdings, Sinopec, and PetroChina (Forbes, 2021). While not all these companies are State-owned, they still need to “follow behind [the] flag” of the Ministry of Commerce (Reilly, 2021). Therefore, foreign governments and companies become hesitant to do business with Chinese enterprises, given that they are confused and fearful about the complicated ties among Chinese multinationals and the CPC (Pearson *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, although these multinationals are impactful on their industries or even the international economy, their opportunities are shrinking.

For instance, the CPC announced its “Made in China 2025” policy in 2015, which envisions China transitioning from low-end manufacturing to becoming a high-technology producer in such areas as robotics, artificial intelligence, information technology and clean energy replacing foreign imports to a high degree at home, and becoming a leader abroad while integrating into global manufacturing chains (Make in China, 2018). But developed countries, including the United States, became increasingly alarmed by the national security implications of China’s ambitions in this area. The blowback caused China to downplay the policy and its goals (Martina *et al.*, 2018; Cyrill, 2018). Australia, meanwhile, is among those states that are also seeking to reduce its supply chain dependence on China (EurAsian Times, 2022; Kuang *et al.* 2019; Sipalan, 2019). Accordingly, State economic intervention has led to “securiti[s]ation of cross-border trade and investment flows in China” (Pearson *et al.*, 2022).

Of special concern to other states are the activities of Chinese telecommunication multinationals in the global market. This is likely due to the National Intelligence Law of the PRC in 2017, which Article 7 states that “all organisations and citizens shall support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts [work] in accordance with law” (China Law Translate, 2017). As a result, there have been accusations that Huawei and ZTE devices and systems have been used to spy on their customers to abide by the Chinese law, although the companies themselves deny it (Hamilton, 2018; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020; Kaska *et al.*, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2019). However, in 2021, Bloomberg reported that in 2012, China used Huawei equipment “as a conduit for espionage” in Australia in an incident that substantiated suspicions in both countries [Australia and the United States] about the company and its relationship to Chinese intelligence (Robertson & Tarabay, 2021). In February 2018, FBI Director Chris Wray warned against public servants and State agencies buying Huawei and ZTE phones, and in May that year, the Pentagon banned the use of these telephones on United States military bases (Salinas, 2018; Shaban, 2018). Australia was the first country to ban Huawei from its 5G networks (Slezak & Bogle, 2018). In May 2019, President Trump, by National Security Order, effectively banned Huawei from the United States market (Keane, 2021). To date, at least seven other countries, all United States allies, have banned Huawei from their 5G networks; others, such as India, Spain, and Vietnam, have taken what the Council on Foreign Relations calls a

“quieter approach”. Yet the American think tank has acknowledged that “China’s Huawei is Winning the 5G Race” (Sacks, 2021). The company has established a significant presence in potential markets such as South America, Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Accordingly, although the PRC is not getting blowback from all quarters, it is raising concerns and suspicions that will affect the abilities of its global corporations to conduct business. China’s economic statecraft, motivated in large part by its domestic policy goals, has created uncertainty for the international political economy, and in overreaching, has suffered political blowback.

## 8. Security: Growing Assertiveness

Graham Allison’s “Thucydides Trap” suggests that war can result when a rising state threatens the hegemony of an existing great power (Allison, 2017). The PRC seeks security for its economic construction and transformation into a great power. This includes building a “combat-ready” modern military and indicating a willingness to use it. Xi Jinping’s recent report to the Twentieth Party Congress in 2022 indicates a growing focus on national security, with 91 mentions of the word “security” (安全 *anquan*) (Lin et al., 2022). As the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi has long stated his ambitions to build a strong military force that “can fight to win” (能打胜仗 *nengda shengzhang*) (Xi, 2014b). In the Nineteenth National Congress in 2017, Xi announced a road map for China’s national defence and military modernisation: enhance basic mechanisation and informatisation by 2020, achieve fundamental national defence and military modernisation by 2035, and fully transform into a world-class armed force by the middle of the 21st century (Xi, 2017). Over the last ten years, China’s military has developed significantly. The defence budget increases every year “in line with the overall level of economic development”. The Chinese government announced a 2022 defence budget of USD229.5 billion, a nominal year-on-year increase of 7.1 per cent (Grevatt & MacDonald, 2022; Jash, 2022).

The Navy, in particular, has been allocated more resources to accommodate the expansion of China’s overseas interests. From 2013 to 2020, the Navy commissioned an average of 16.5 new vessels every year (Chan, 2022). It has introduced new generations of submarines, destroyers, frigates, cruisers, and amphibious ships for sea power projection, as well as

three aircraft carriers. Since 2015, the number of ships in the PLA Navy has surpassed that of the United States Navy, with a total of 348 ships in 2021 (Congressional Research Service, 2022). Beijing has also increased its naval paramilitary capability. The number of patrol vessels available to Chinese coast guard agencies has increased from approximately 156 in 2012 to 524 in 2020 (Guilfoyle & Chan, 2022). The China Coast Guard has vessels of up to 12,000 tonnes and has refitted ex-naval vessels as patrol ships, including several Type-053H2G frigates it received from the PLA Navy in 2015 (Wang, 2015). Although China's defence capability is not yet competitive with that of the United States' armed forces, the growth in both military and paramilitary capability concerns observers who are worried by signs that it is willing to use its military power aggressively.

With the increase in military capability, the PRC has gradually developed more intimidating behaviours. The territorial dispute in the South China Sea is a prominent example of the PRC's growing assertiveness in maritime security. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled invalid China's claim to exclusive control of the maritime area within the "nine-dash line" under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016; Sison III, 2018). The claim directly affects maritime routes, fishing zones, reefs, and other features that are also variously claimed by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam; it would see up to 90 per cent of several states' exclusive economic zones ceded to the PRC (Sison III, 2018). To shape the behaviour of its neighbours and rivals, China has utilised the full spectrum of coercive tools, including diplomatic sanctions, economic sanctions, and military coercion (Zhang, 2019), threatening freedom of navigation along sea lines of communication, maritime trade, and the economic security of neighbouring states. To some extent, the Party's legitimacy increases through these assertive behaviours, since it can demonstrate that national rejuvenation becomes partially successful under the CPC's leadership. However, an assertive security policy has given the Party less room to wiggle. On the one hand, it needs to be constant and continuous. If one day the Party is unable to undertake more assertive responses in the South China Sea, its legitimacy can potentially be undermined.

Tensions have risen in the Taiwan Strait under Xi Jinping, who has focused on the issue of Taiwan's "reunification" with the mainland. In 2019, on the fortieth anniversary of the *Letter to Taiwan Compatriots*, in

which the post-Mao leadership first used the word “reunification” instead of “liberation”, Xi declared that the Taiwan issue and the historic mission of peaceful unification cannot be passed on to the next generation to resolve. He urged the Taiwanese people to engage with the idea of “one country, two systems” (Xi, 2019) – the same formulation by which Hong Kong had been promised no change in its way of life for 50 years. If this is successful, it will be a significant achievement for the CPC. However, this becomes less likely to happen after several wrongful moves. The Taiwanese people watched closely as the National Security Law imposed on Hong Kong in 2020 destroyed the promise of “one country, two systems”. Beginning with the visit of US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022, the PLA conducted a number of live-fire military exercises and missile tests in six zones around the island. Missiles fell in waters adjacent to Taiwan’s marine borders as well as those of Japan and the Philippines’ economic zone. The PLA also flew aircraft across the Taiwan Strait median line more frequently than ever before – 302 times in just a month (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Surely, these intimidating activities will increase the Party’s domestic power base in the short term. However, the CPC needs to be more careful since any miscalculation could risk triggering a regional or even global war. On the one hand, it needs to continue the firm position on the Taiwan issue to maintain its legitimacy. On the other hand, rationally speaking, the CPC would not be willing to escalate the tension into a military conflict, given that being involved in a war that it is unlikely to win will affect the Party’s legitimacy at home. Then, a question remains: To what extent is growing assertiveness across the Taiwan Strait helpful for the CPC’s unfinished business in Taiwan?

## **9. Global Governance: Our Model is Better than Yours**

Great powers such as China have the capacity to impose upon and restrict the global political economy (Ping, 2017). Shifting its strategy from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievement” (有所作为 *yousuo zuowei*) (Yan, 2014), the CPC has become more insistent on its right to express its great power capacity in support of what it defines as its national interests. This includes creating a beneficial regional environment for China’s national development, including by attempting to dominate discourse in regional and global governance (Xi, 2014b).

One way in which the PRC shows its great power superiority is through its response to criticism from the international community that issues, including anything pertaining to Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, are purely PRC “internal affairs”. The CPC’s control over its political system and economy has allowed it repeatedly to resist pressure for democratic reform, quash public protests, restrict religious and other freedoms, and block information via censorship of media and the internet. The CPC controls the domestic narrative by propagating the ideologically “correct” interpretation of events in media, educational settings, and beyond, and policing “dangerous thought” (Johnson, 2021; McGregor, 2011; Shambaugh, 2007). Its response to criticism of human rights abuses in China by Japan’s parliament is typical, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian stating that the issues “are purely China’s internal affairs, bear on China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and allow no irresponsible comment by any external forces” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Such uncompromising rhetoric, backed by growing power, enables overreach and disables the kind of useful dialogue that could lead to compromise and enhance the PRC’s global standing.

Meanwhile, the CPC tries to present its policies as an alternative path for China (Zhen, 2021). China’s aspirations to be the “reformer” of the existing international order can be seen in, for instance, its active engagement in oceans governance (Mazarr *et al.*, 2018; Tyler, 2019). It criticises the existing maritime order as serving the interests of traditional sea powers (Fu & Chen, 2018; Yang, 2019). The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan of 2021 states that China aims to promote the “establishment of a fair and reasonable international maritime order” and a “maritime community of shared destiny” (State Council, 2021) – an echo of Xi’s broader foreign relations goal of creating a “community of shared destiny” in the region and beyond. While Beijing has not clarified exactly what this would entail, its actions in several areas illustrate. China has also been actively involved in Antarctica and on the issue of marine sustainability in the United Nations (Li, 2015; Xu, 2018; Lanteigne, 2020). Essentially, the PRC attempts to protect its national interests through self-serving reforms to global governance structures.

These “reforms”, to a certain extent, increase the CPC’s legitimacy in its home base, as it demonstrates China’s gradual leadership in global governance. However, liberal states, such as Australia and the United States, have raised concerns that China challenges existing norms and the existing

liberal rule-based order. For example, Beijing pursues activities that are grey areas in international maritime law to establish legitimacy for its claims over the South China Sea, regarding Taiwan and the broader region (Lin, 2022; Dutton, 2019; Erickson *et al.*, 2019; Guilfoyle, 2019; Zhang, 2019), by employing “civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities” (Mazarr, 2015). Such activities include the coast guard conducting “law enforcement” operations in contested maritime space, harassment of fishing vessels from other states by maritime militias, and reclaiming land on reefs and building military installations on them. While the PRC claims that it is “reforming” the maritime order, others view China as revisionist, which is slowly decoupling from the existing international system. Under such context, China’s international status decreases. Consequently, the Party’s credibility at home may potentially be affected, as global prestige has been one of the major sources of its legitimacy.

The “dynamic Zero-COVID” policy, as an example of domestic policy overreach, was also an attempt to promote China’s global prestige, though the impact was, in fact, the opposite. Beginning in 2020, China created propaganda extolling the “China solution” that was “ostensibly directed at foreign countries” but in reality was for domestic consumption, to show the “benefits of party rule” (McGregor, 2020). It attempted to cultivate the idea of “external perceptions of China as a positive force, centred around themes of responsibility and generosity” (Rolland, 2020). In 2020, Chinese citizens viewed images of Chinese planes delivering medical masks and equipment to advanced countries such as Italy (Balmer, 2020). It framed Australia’s demand for an independent inquiry into the virus’s origins as an insult to Chinese sovereignty, and spread various conspiracy theories that claimed the virus had originated with US army personnel and facilities. Propaganda stressed the heroism and Xi-led success of China’s efforts against the novel coronavirus while amplifying the relative lack of success elsewhere, including in India and the US – sometimes in such self-assured or subtly dismissive language that it inspired blowback.

The Party’s legitimacy would have increased if the policy had proven to be successful. It was not, however. After most countries began to “live with COVID”, Beijing continued to adhere to its “dynamic Zero-COVID” approach, only to justify that the “China Model” was superior to the West based on its relatively low COVID death rate (Chan & Lee, 2022; Buckley, 2021). Despite dissatisfaction from its people, the CPC continued frequent

mass testing, intense surveillance, isolation, quarantine, and border closures. As the months wore on, the Chinese people grew increasingly frustrated and critical. A few days before the Congress began, a hand-written banner hung from Sitong Bridge in Beijing's northwest Haidian district: "We want to eat, not do coronavirus tests; reform, not the Cultural Revolution. We want freedom, not lockdowns; elections, not rulers. We want dignity, not lies. Be citizens, not enslaved people" (Shepherd, 2022). Additionally, in late November 2022, public anger spread across China towards widening COVID-19 lockdowns. Protests and demonstrations first occurred in Xinjiang, then erupted nationwide – the first time since 1989. People not only went against the restrictive social distancing policy but also began to call for Xi Jinping and the CPC to step down (Wong & Williams, 2022; Birtles, 2022). By the end of 2022, the Party began to modify the policy slightly. Clearly, as a policy to promote China's global prestige, the "dynamic Zero-COVID" policy has proven to be ineffective. Instead, it can quickly turn into an anti-party protest due to the economic and social crisis, which undermines the CPC's legitimacy domestically.

## **10. Impacts of the Not-So-Peaceful Rise**

Thanks to the suppression of dissent, ideological indoctrination, and the CPC's control over social and other media, China's assertive foreign policy appears to be well received on the home front (Fewsmith, 2021; Shirk, 2022). It reinforces Xi Jinping's image as someone who strongly represents China's interests abroad. With other points of view suppressed, it helps to shape how its citizens view the world – including those involved in formulating the PRC's foreign policy (Wang, 2019).

Nevertheless, in a broader context, China's international actions may potentially undermine the Party's power base at home. The CPC creates a sense of patriotic pride for the country's international accomplishments and its growing global prestige, which has been central to Party legitimacy as it pursues prosperity and strength (Dickson, 2016). For a long time, the growing international status has been based on global integration and friendly relations. However, foreign policy assertiveness has created antagonism towards the CPC and the PRC in the international sphere. Beijing's position in the Russo-Ukraine war has been one of the examples. While most of the world is on Ukraine's side, China receives criticism for supporting Russia. "Oriented around the need to counter the United

States and its allies and partners” (Greitens, 2022), it is losing popularity outside China. In the context of United States-China relations, although a number of developing countries have embraced the “China Model”, which does not require them to adopt liberal democracy, it has alarmed observers like Donald Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and others in the Washington establishment (Clarke, 2020; Pompeo, 2020). The Biden administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy identifies the PRC as “the only competitor [to the US] with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance [that] objective” (The White House, 2022).

### 11. Australia’s Perceptions

Australia, meanwhile, is concerned that China’s activities in the Indo-Pacific could undermine stability in the country’s immediate region (Department of Defence, 2020). Canberra is worried about the effects on regional sovereignty, security, democracy, and adherence to the current international rules-based order. As suggested by former national security adviser John Lee, an expert on Chinese political economy and Indo-Pacific strategic affairs:

*Hubris and overreach will come back to bite. China has crossed the line too far and too many times. Democracies in North America, Europe, and Asia are starting to talk in similar ways and move in similar directions, albeit at different speeds as democratic processes are always messy and inelegant (Lee, 2021).*

In response to concerns over China’s foreign policy, Australia announced, via the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and 2020 Force Structure Plan, that it would spend AUD800 million to purchase AGM-158C LRASM (long-range anti-ship missiles) for its F/A-18F Super Hornets, AUD1 billion to create a sovereign missile programme, along with the formation of AUKUS and the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (ABC, 2021; Davis, 2020; Galloway & Hartcher, 2020; Prime Minister of Australia, 2021). The Quad, AUKUS, and Australia’s domestic and foreign policy responses rebuke the PRC for underestimating the capacity and resolve of states like Australia to counter its hegemonism. Arguably, the most concerning development for Beijing is AUKUS, the 2021 collective security pact that emerged as a

response to fears over China's aggressive foreign policy behaviour. Under the agreement, Australia will purchase nuclear submarines and build an east coast base from which the AUKUS powers (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) will be able to contain PRC power projection in the Indo-Pacific (Pfluke, 2019).

Arguably, foreign antagonism will often lead to a strengthening of a regime's domestic power base. This is somewhat of a case in China, especially when nationalism has been used by the CPC. Nationalist sentiment has historically been mobilised by the Chinese leadership to consolidate internal legitimacy, particularly during periods of external pressure or diplomatic conflict. The CPC has effectively framed foreign criticism and geopolitical rivalry as threats to national sovereignty, thereby reinforcing domestic unity and support for the regime (Ali, 2007). However, when foreign policy overassertiveness creates more diplomatic challenges, the Party's legitimacy may be affected. This is because one of the Party's achievements in the past decades has been the country's growing global prestige, which is based on the continual engagement with the outside world. Therefore, if the State continues its decoupling foreign policy approach, it will lose popularity abroad. Consequently, the Party's domestic legitimacy may be undermined when China's international status declines.

Furthermore, foreign policy assertiveness has declined China's economic status, which may threaten the Party's popularity at home. China plays a major part in the global economy, but it is not the only player. More than 35 per cent of China's GDP is reliant on merchandise trade (World Bank, 2022). The PRC is uniquely vulnerable economically because of its high dependence on energy imports and exports to the global liberal market (Ping, 2014). For instance, China is relatively dependent on Australia for iron ore, coal, and other commodities it needs to maintain economic development and, therefore, political stability. There are very few sources of reliable supply, high-volume, low-cost iron ore, with Australia's proximity also making it highly convenient as a source. In addition, without access to the consumer markets of the developed world (the United States and the European Union alone have a combined population of almost 800 million), as well as globally sourced technologies, corporate knowledge, finance, and innovation, the PRC would not have experienced such rapid development. Without ongoing access, which is threatened by foreign policy assertiveness, the China Dream of national rejuvenation will falter.

Over the course of the economic reforms, the CPC made a deal with the Chinese people—in essence, “stay out of politics and we will look after you”. This social contract is harder to keep when foreign policy assertiveness makes it more difficult for Chinese companies to survive, students abroad are restricted in what they can study or come under suspicion of espionage, and energy shortages lead to blackouts and heating issues in winter. As a result of a trade war with the United States, Chinese investment there plummeted in 2019 by nearly 90 per cent (Rappeport, 2019). Concerns over human rights violations have led to at least 28 Chinese organisations being blacklisted, “effectively blocking those entities from buying American products” (Mozur & Swanson, 2019). In 2022, the Biden administration issued a further ban to implement “necessary controls” on the export of “advanced computing integrated circuits (ICs), computer commodities that contain such ICs, and certain semiconductor manufacturing items” to China, due to concerns about the Chinese domestic surveillance programme (Bennett, 2022). This was devastating news for the Chinese technological industries, which heavily rely on these advanced chips in their manufacturing process. Despite cracking down on some tech leaders for other reasons, the CPC needs to tread carefully with business, as profit losses and the shedding of workers will inevitably lead to social problems.

China’s domestic situation has become even more difficult to sustain due to the CPC’s obsession with its “dynamic Zero-COVID” policy. As part of the campaign of promoting the superiority of the China Model, the regime of snap and extended lockdowns, including factories and other places of business, time-consuming mass testing, and sometimes forced quarantine, contributed to the plunge in the nation’s second-quarter GDP growth to only 0.4 per cent in 2022 (Tang, 2022). By the third quarter, it was up to 3.9 per cent and expected to rise by at least a percentage point in 2023 – yet this still counted as sluggish by the standards of the post-reform era (Reynolds, 2022).

The economy is facing other challenges as well. The prolonged Zero-COVID policy began to cause serious damage to the economy in 2022 when youth unemployment rose to just under 20 per cent (Cai, 2022; Bram, 2022). According to the World Bank, exports of goods and services as a percentage of Chinese GDP declined from 36 per cent in 2006 to 20 per cent in 2021 (Liu, 2022); in 2020, to address this trend, the CPC adopted the strategy of “dual circulation” – building up the domestic market to mitigate reliance on

exports – but it is not clear whether the Xi Jinping administration has the capacity to take on all the vested interests that such a restructuring would require. Putting money into the hands of consumers would also require a diversion of funds from the State sector, which could weaken the Party's tight control of the economy. Accordingly, while a more rational policy and less assertiveness would not solve all these problems, this article argues that they would help to avoid some of the problems that have sparked such dissatisfaction.

## **12. Conclusion**

This article has examined how assertiveness in foreign policy could undermine the Party's power base at home. The CPC's legitimacy is central to two factors: China's rising international status and economic success. Both factors are linked to the continual global integration and friendly relations. More specifically, China's status as a great power nowadays is due to a combination of access to the global liberal market as the "world's factory" and its biggest market, and one that attracts significant foreign investment, and the statecraft of the CPC under Deng that used neo-mercantilist policies to develop through export-oriented industrialisation while keeping a low profile in international affairs. However, because of the assertiveness of foreign policy, these two factors that determine the Party's prosperity and strength are at risk.

Economic success and political stability have made the CPC increasingly confident in its governing model. Xi Jinping's cultural nationalist worldview argues that China's development and rapid economic growth have primarily been a result of taking the "correct" socialist path. In overestimating the ideological component of success, it has underestimated how much it has benefited from 40 years of economic reform. Deliberately rejecting Deng's "hide and bide" approach, which enabled those reforms to proceed relatively smoothly and in cooperation with the existing global economic order, the CPC has been tentatively overreaching its foreign policy to demonstrate its place in the world as a great power and to achieve ideological and geopolitical, as opposed to pragmatic goals.

Frankly, the existing international system is relatively unfavourable to China, as it is heavily skewed in favour of the Western liberal order dominated by the United States. It needs to be more inclusive (Ikenberry, 2018; 2020). However, the CPC, rather than reforming the existing global

order, as it claims it wants to do, has ended up decoupling from it. Aspects of its economic statecraft, acts of military coercion or aggression, wolf-warrior diplomacy and its “dynamic Zero-COVID” measures have gradually disengaged China from the outside world.

Clearly, the CPC has overestimated its capacity in foreign policy and has encountered blowback. The global political economy is far larger and more complex than the CPC seems to have considered. Its pursuit of economic statecraft, where it appears to border on coercion or results in other countries taking on high loads of debt, has made it unpopular with weaker states, who feel their autonomy threatened. Developed liberal states, such as the United States and Australia, have become concerned that China is challenging the global liberal market rules-based order in ways that will only benefit itself. The PRC’s foreign policy assertiveness has resulted in some pushback from states, firms, and people from these countries. It seems that for all the talk of “communities of shared destiny”, the CPC’s China Dream is only for China, and not for all. Overall, these overreaching foreign policy decisions damage China’s international status, and consequently may affect the Party’s legitimacy, which centres on the country’s growing global prestige.

The continual economic success, another source of the CPC’s legitimacy, is also affected by foreign policy assertiveness. Businesses and citizens in China have begun to suffer the consequences from these poor decisions in foreign policy, including sanctions, termination of foreign investments, and bans of overseas visits. These have resulted in a downturn in the domestic economy and increased their frustration towards the Party. In other words, if China continues to make these international mistakes, it will damage the State’s economic performance. Ironically, the CPC pursues a policy to continue its economic success and global prestige to maintain its legitimacy domestically. However, the more it does, the more blowback it receives.

When the reformists took power in the late 1970s, China was still suffering from the consequences of Mao’s extreme economic and foreign affairs policies, and the Party was facing a legitimacy crisis. It was Deng Xiaoping’s creation of socialist State-directed market capitalism and engagement with the global liberal market that rescued the CPC, not some abstract “correct” socialist path. The miscalculations of the CPC have led it to foreign policy overassertiveness. They may create barriers to the PRC’s future success and undermine the foundations of its present.

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