CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER: ASPIRATIONS, REALITY, AND AMBITIONS IN THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

by **Kenton Thibaut**

Atlantic Council

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Author

Kenton Thibaut

Editor

Iain Robertson

Cover: China's President Xi Jinping is shown on a screen through digitally decorated glass during the World Internet Conference (WIC) in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province, China, November 23, 2020. REUTERS/Aly Song

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As China's military and economic power has grown, so has its ambition to shape global norms to suit its priorities. China believes that the United States currently dominates the international system, and sees growing Western opposition to China as evidence that the current order is now a threat to the continued security of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As such, China's leadership has come to see its ability to reshape the international order—or, at least, to decenter US power within it—as essential to the party's future.

China's leaders have clearly articulated that they believe that Western countries, and especially the United States, have been able to exert global dominance because they possess what China terms "discourse power" (话语权): a type of narrative agenda-setting ability focused on reshaping global governance, values, and norms to legitimize and facilitate the expression of state power.

For the CCP, gaining discourse power translates into an ability to increase China's geopolitical power by creating consensus around an alternative, China-led international order— one that privileges state sovereignty over civil liberties, and that subordinates human rights to state security. China has identified both the digital realm and the geographic regions of the Global South as arenas of opportunity in advancing its goals and gaining a discourse-power advantage over the United States.

China's leadership has been transparent in outlining its goals for both gaining discourse power and implementing a strategy for doing so. Chinese government scholars believe that discourse power comprises two, mutually reinforcing components: the "power to speak," or to articulate a coherent vision for the world order, and the "power to be heard," or to have audiences have exposure to, and then to buy into, this message. This involves embedding cultural values within a system so that it comes to structure the relations between states—in both subjective terms (such as norms) and objective terms (such as rules and standards). To operationalize its strategies for gaining discourse power, China has embarked on a major restructuring of the party-state to ensure that the CCP Central Committee—the seat of CCP leadership, of which Xi Jinping is the head—retains direct oversight over the bodies responsible for carrying out China's discourse-power goals.

Chinese official and academic writings also show that the CCP has come to see the digital arena as crucial in its discourse-power strategy, seeing the opportunities brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution as offering a chance to disrupt the hegemony of the West.[1] As one Chinese government official wrote in July 2020, "technological changes in different periods throughout history not only bring about economic changes, but also affect changes in the global power structure [...] The digital economy is prompting a reshuffle, and China has the opportunity to gain a first-mover advantage."[2] Beijing has made clear its intentions to command the digital world, announcing its aims to dominate advanced-technology manufacturing by 2025, to lead in international standards setting by 2035, and to become a "cyber superpower" by 2050.[3]

> **For the CCP, gaining discourse power translates into increased geopolitical power by creating consensus around an alternative, China-led international order— one that privileges state sovereignty over civil liberties, and subordinates human rights to state security. China has identified both the digital realm and the Global South as prime areas of opportunity.**

As such, China has embarked on a concerted strategy to gain discourse power via the digital domain. It has done so through several mechanisms: by shaping local information ecosystems via social and digital media platforms, by promoting CCP-approved norms for digital governance and Chinese-developed international technical standards, and by offering the physical digital and Internet infrastructure on which these information ecosystems rely at an affordable cost, and with no conditions for how it is used.

China also sees the Global South as potentially more receptive to its norms and governance principles, and as an attractive market for Chinese digital-infrastructure offerings. China's external propaganda narratives couch Beijing's activities in the digital sphere as ultimately aimed at granting

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1   For background on the "Fourth Industrial Revolution," see: Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution," Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-12/fourth-industrial-revolution.

2   Chen Wenhui, "陈文辉详解数字经济投资逻辑：得平台者得天下" ("Chen Wenhui Explained the Investment Logic of Digital Economy in Detail: Those Who Win the Platform Win the World"), Yicai, July 28, 2020, https://archive.ph/Y0S7Y.

3   Johnathan E. Hillman, The Digital Silk Road: China's Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future (New York: Harper Business, 2021), xii.

countries more power over the development and direction of their digital economies.

China has promoted the norm of "cyber sovereignty" (网络主权)—in China's definition, the right of each country to exert total control over the Internet within its borders—in various international organizations, technical standards-setting bodies, and its commercial relations with countries interested in Chinese products and services. In its external propaganda messaging, China often targets audiences with narratives that erode the legitimacy of the liberal democratic framework and that resonate with local experience; for example, in the Global South, Chinese messaging on digital cooperation emphasizes a shared distrust of Western governments or a shared experience as "developing" (to use China's term) countries.

In actuality, however, China's strategy is less about a true attempt to make the digital world more inclusive, and more about supporting the Chinese government's leadership goals. While boosting its economic growth and protecting its ability to exert political control domestically are two major goals of China's promotion of cyber sovereignty, Beijing sees laying the necessary groundwork for gaining a discourse-power advantage over the West as another key objective. As Adam Segal puts it, "cyber sovereignty represents a pushback against the attempted universalization of [Western] norms [regarding privacy, free speech, access to information, and the role of regulation] that has become the default of the current operating system, as well as a reassertion of the priority of governments over non-state actors."[4]

China sees engaging in targeted messaging, and gaining support for its normative framework across various audiences, as better positioning it to gain the discourse power it sees as essential for reshaping the international environment in a way that better facilitates the expression of Chinese power. Additionally, China's leaders fundamentally do not believe that the Chinese perspective can be "heard" unless they can make the soil fertile globally for their message to seed.

As such, China's strategy around discourse power should not be understood as an attempt to turn the world into an authoritarian stage. China is clear in emphasizing its agnosticism with regard to the domestic political characteristics of the governments with which it engages.[5] To this end, it is less important to China whether countries support "cyber sovereignty" because it offers them more freedom in determining their digital futures, or whether governments see support for this approach as an opportunity to clamp down on Internet freedoms. In either case, China gains discourse power by increasing buy-in for its vision of the global digital order, bringing it closer to achieving its aims of gaining a comparative advantage over the West.

Lastly, while China has advanced presence and strategy in standard-setting bodies, normative spaces, the digital information ecosystem, and the provision of physical infrastructure, the Western world's approach has been more piecemeal and reactive. Notably, China is advancing much of this strategy through the very mechanisms the United States and its allies created to govern and shape a "free, open, secure, and interoperable" digital world.[6] Chinese leaders have taken a bet on the West's overconfidence in its systems and have built a relatively successful strategy of quietly shaping, repurposing, and encircling them to advance China's discourse power.

Any effort to counter this reshaping, therefore, relies on the democratic world reinvigorating its engagement in these spaces, more clearly defining mutually reinforcing industrial, commercial, and geopolitical strategies, and doubling down on creating a more geographically inclusive, multistakeholder, collaborative system.

4   Adam Segal, "China's Vision for Cyber Sovereignty and the Global Governance of Cyberspace" in Nadège Rolland, ed., An Emerging China-Centric Order: China's Vision for a New World Order in Practice, NBR 87, August 2020, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr87_aug2020.pdf.
5   "Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Turkey, June 28, 2004, https://archive.ph/apLYd.
6   For more on the meaning of "free, open, secure, and interoperable" see: "Declaration for the Future of the Internet," US Department of State, April 28, 2022, https://www.state.gov/declaration-for-the-future-of-the-internet; Rebecca Klar, "US, Partner Countries Launch Declaration to Promote Free, Open Internet," Hill, April 28, 2022, https://thehill.com/policy/technology/3469367-u-s-partner-countries-launch-declaration-to-promote-free-open-internet/; Robert Morgus and Justin Sherman, "The Idealized Internet vs. Internet Realities," New America, July 26, 2018, https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/reports/idealized-internet-vs-internet-realities/.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides a framework for understanding China's discourse-power ambitions—what Chinese officials and scholars have said they are, the strategy China has developed to achieve them, and an initial assessment of the successes and limitations of these efforts to date.

The report begins by tracing the evolution of China's conception of discourse power, from China's period of reform and opening in 1978 to the current era under President Xi Jinping, and how it came to occupy a central role in China's national strategy. It illustrates how Chinese scholars studied the example of the United States and developed an understanding of discourse power as both the "power to speak" and the "power to be heard"; these comprise, respectively, articulating a coherent and cohesive vision for the world order and having this messaging gain support from a global audience. It shows how Chinese leadership came to believe that, through discourse power, the United States was able to create and maintain an international system that furthers Western values and norms, as well as US economic and military geopolitical power. It describes how China came to see certain areas of the global landscape—including the digital sphere and regions of the Global South—as areas to engage in to gain a discourse power advantage vis-à-vis the West.

The next section takes a closer look at how the party-state has been restructured, in part, to help operationalize China's goals to gain "the power to speak" and "the power to be heard." A core part of this effort is consolidation of the CCP Central Committee's oversight over the main organizations responsible for carrying out discourse-power-related work. The Central Committee is the seat of party power in China, of which Xi Jinping is the head. This analysis outlines how this restructuring reoriented the main organs of power in the Chinese party-state around the party's goals to gain

international discourse power, and describes their various responsibilities with respect to this work.

The third section focuses on China's strategy for gaining discourse power by centering itself in the ecosystem of global connectivity. This strategy includes gaining the "power to speak" by using social and digital media platforms to shape local information environments in its favor. It also includes gaining the "power to be heard" by promoting the CCP-approved norm of "cyber sovereignty"—a vision of strict state control over the Internet—in multilateral standards-setting organizations, by creating its own multilateral institutions that spread and promote cyber-sovereignty principles abroad, and by using commercial and diplomatic engagements in regional multilateral organizations to popularize and gain buy-in for China's vision for the global order.

Lastly, this report provides a brief assessment of both the successes and limitations of China's discourse-power operations. While China has made its ambitions and intentions for shaping the international order clear—and has been open and transparent regarding its ultimate aims—it still faces obstacles in establishing an alternative order based on China-defined principles. Efforts to effectively counter these efforts then rely on the democratic world understanding the gaps that China has exploited in the current system, and doubling down on creating a more inclusive, multistakeholder, collaborative system for shaping a digitally connected global future.

China's ambitions to supplant the current liberal international order presents the most viable challenge to the ideological consensus around open societies since the end of the Cold War. It has embarked on an ambitious strategy to gain the discourse power it needs to achieve this task, and this report illustrates the scope, intentions, and purposeful implementation of this integrated strategy.

CHINA'S UNDERSTANDING OF DISCOURSE POWER AND WORLD ORDER

In China's view, a country possesses discourse power when it is able to shape the existing international order to reflect both its interests (for example, economic and/or security interests) and its value system (for example, Western values of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism). China views itself as currently existing in a discourse-power deficit vis-à-vis the West, and especially the United States—which, as a result, makes it a "rule taker" rather than a "rule maker" in the international system.[7]

According to Chinese scholarship, the political, economic, technological, linguistic, and cultural dominance of the United States has allowed it to structure the international system to its advantage, in terms of both value orientation and institutional arrangements.

The value orientation is that of Western democratic, or "universal," values—for example, a conception of human rights based on liberal notions of individual liberty. Institutional arrangements include, for example, international economic organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which Chinese scholars argue organize state behavior around propagating Western capitalist values in the global economic system. From this perspective, the current international order both reinforces and serves as a tool for Western countries, and especially the United States, to perpetuate continued dominance of global political, economic, security, and value systems.[8]

However, China's view of how discourse power shapes the world was, in large part, informed by its own historical experience and changing perspectives of its own view of China's place in the world.

2008 marked a turning point for China. A confluence of domestic and international events convinced China's leadership to shift to a more assertive foreign policy posture.

China from 1978–2008: Stepping Out from the West's Shadow

China's position as a "rule taker" vis-à-vis the West was acceptable, if not ideal, to Chinese policymakers for most of the period of reform and opening (改革开放), which began in 1978. This period saw China turn from a nearly autarkic economy to one fueled largely by foreign direct investment (FDI) and export-driven growth. In the 1980s and 1990s, China began to open its economy to foreign trade, acceding to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. By 2008, China's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) had risen to more than $3,400 (in current US dollars) from about $200 in 1978, an increase of more than 1,600 percent.[9]

The overriding focus for China's leadership during this time was on ensuring internal stability and fueling economic growth. As such, China followed Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy approach of taoguangyanghui (韬光养晦), a concept that translates to "hiding [one's] capabilities, focusing on building up national strength, and biding [one's] time."[10]

However, 2008 marked a turning point for China. A confluence of domestic and international events convinced China's leadership to shift from *taoguangyanghui* to a more assertive foreign policy posture.

First, China gained more confidence in its social and economic model following the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. China was the first major economy in the world to recover from the crisis. After a short but steep downturn in 2008, China's economy recovered to grow by 8.7 percent in 2009 and by 10.4 percent in 2010, at a time when Western nations were still struggling.[11] This led to a view among many in China's leadership that the country was entering a period of "strategic opportunity," with the West in decline and the East rising.[12]

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7   Ruan Jianping, "话语权与国际秩序的建构" ("The Right to Speak and the Construction of International Order"), International Politics 9 (2003).
8   Ibid.
9   "GDP per Capita (Current US$)—China," World Bank, 2020, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=CN.
10   Zheng Qirong, 改革开放以来的中国外交 (China's Diplomacy since the Reform and Opening Up), (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2008), 18.
11   Christine Wong, "The Fiscal Stimulus Programme and Public Governance Issues in China," OECD Journal on Budgeting
      3 (2011), https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/Public%20Governance%20Issues%20in%20China.pdf.
12   Xu Jian, "Rethinking China's Period of Strategic Opportunity," China International Studies 45, 51 (2014), https://
      heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/chintersd45&div=5&id=&page=.

Second, growing nationalism among the Chinese populace created bottom-up domestic pressure for China to act with more confidence on the world stage. This was due, in large part, to China's heavy investment in patriotic education, which the CCP implemented in earnest following the Tiananmen Square democracy-protest movement and subsequent crackdown in 1989. A central theme in patriotic education was China's grievance over its "century of humiliation" (百年国耻), a period of one hundred years beginning with the Opium Wars in the 1840s and ending with the establishment of Communist China in 1949. This emphasizes China's exploitation at the hands of Western imperialist powers and was largely designed to curb the infiltration of Western influence that the party believed was largely responsible for the Tiananmen Square crisis.[13] As a result, China's popular youth-nationalist movement gained momentum in the mid-2000s—and along with it came a demand to reclaim China's "rightful place" in world affairs.[14]

Connected mostly by new information technology, particularly the Internet, popular nationalists (sometimes referred to as China's "angry youths," or fenqing [愤青]) engaged with each other in both online and offline shows of force, and often pressured the government to take more assertive foreign policy positions in defense of China's interests.[15]

For example, "angry youths" engaged in widespread protests following what they viewed as unfair coverage of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, in which Western media organizations like CNN and the BBC focused heavily on ongoing protests promoting the Tibetan independence movement. This was seen by China's patriotic youths as an insult to their country's national pride. Chinese "angry youths" embarked on a widespread online campaign emphasizing Western attempts to "humiliate" China through media coverage, a campaign that was even amplified by the Chinese embassy in the United States at the time.[16] In another example, in 2010, "angry youths" organized massive protests after then Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi visited a World War II memorial at Japan's Yasukuni Shrine. The individuals buried at the site have long been viewed by the Chinese as war criminals who perpetrated mass suffering of China during World War II.[17]

> **As China gained confidence in its growing economic and military power, Beijing also began to take a more expansive view of what it considered to be China's "core" interests - a development that expanded the remit of China's foreign policy domain.**

Additionally, as China gained confidence in its growing economic and military power, Beijing also began to take a more expansive view of what it considered as China's "core" interests, a development that expanded the remit of China's foreign policy domain. Pre-2008, China defined its "core interests" as largely limited to issues concerning territorial sovereignty (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet) and anything affecting or questioning the centrality of CCP leadership to China's political system (for example, calls for multi-party democracy in China would be defined as violating China's "core interests").[18]

However, beginning in 2009, China's official use of the term began to apply to a growing number of foreign policy issues. Data from major official and unofficial Chinese state media reports illustrate the switch that took place from 2008 to 2009. According to a report authored by Michael Swaine, state media mentions of China's "core interests" in the context of foreign policy issues increased from only a single article in the *People's Daily* in 2001 to two hundred and sixty articles in 2009, and three hundred and twenty-five articles in 2010.[19] China in the years before 2008 adopted a foreign policy centered around "learning to live with the hegemon," i.e., conforming to the reality of US dominance of the international order.[20] As China grew more confident, however, it expanded the purview of its core interests on the world stage—and its foreign policy grew more muscular as a result.

At the same time, however, China was responding to what it perceived as a Western-led "China Threat Theory." A prevailing view among Chinese academics was that, after the end of the Cold War, the United States made the expansion of its values the main driver of its foreign policy, and ultimately established an international order on the basis of supposedly "universal values"—that is, on norms that emphasize

13 Orville Schell and John Delury Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century (New York: Random House, 2014), xiii.

14 Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: the Strident Turn," Journal of Contemporary China 22, 82 (2013).

15 Lijun Yang and Yongnian Zheng, "Fen Qings (Angry Youth) in Contemporary China," Journal of Contemporary China 21, 76 (2012), 638.

16 "[东方时空]正告CNN：网民为什么愤怒?" ("Warning to CNN: Why are Netizens Angry?"), Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, April 1, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20220715165604/http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zclm2013/zt/szwt/200804/t20080401_5074704.htm.

17 "Anti-Japan Protests Spread across China," Financial Times, September 18, 2012, https://www.ft.com/content/85f4f7a2-0138-11e2-99d3-00144feabdc0.

18 Stephanie T. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Susan Shirk, and Wang Yizhou, "Does Promoting 'Core Interests' Do China More Harm Than Good?" ChinaFile, May 2, 2013, https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/does-promoting-core-interests-do-china-more-harm-good.

19 Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" China Leadership Monitor 32 (2010), 3, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM34MS_FINAL.pdf.

20 Jia Qingguo, "Learning to Live with the Hegemon: Evolution of China's Policy Toward the US since the End of the Cold War," Journal of Contemporary China 14, 44 (2005), 395.

freedom, equality, and justice, but only in the context of Western-style democracy.[21]

In this context, Chinese scholars argue that Western policy-makers promulgated the "China Threat Theory," or the idea that a rising China and its Chinese socialist system posed a fundamental threat to the order that the United States had built.[22] This anxiety was reflected in Chinese academic writings on foreign policy. A survey of one hundred and eight Chinese academic articles revealed that nearly 26 percent of authors viewed the United States as using its control over the international system to "contain" China, with "almost all of the papers seeing the US "pivot to Asia" as having an anti-China agenda at its core."[23]

Chinese fears over the dominance of Western "universal values" were outlined in a leaked April 2013 internal CCP document known as "Document No. 9"—or, more formally, "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" (关于当前意识形态领域情况的通报). In it, party leaders outlined the threat of universal values to party legitimacy, defining the threat as "the people who espouse universal values believe Western freedom, democracy, and human rights are universal and eternal. This is evident in their distortion of the Party's own [values]...that 'the West's values are the prevailing norm for all human civilization' [...] Given Western nations' long-term dominance [of the global system], these arguments can be confusing and deceptive."[24]

Beijing views the current order as inextricably bound up with Western-style democracy and the values that undergird it. As such, this order is inherently hostile to China and incompatible with its ability to rise. As one Chinese scholar put it, "Western countries use their discourse hegemony to slander China. Negative discourses such as 'China Threat Theory' have seriously damaged China's national image and undermined its [power]."[25] As such, China's leadership saw the urgency of developing a strategy to shape perceptions of its rise, to influence the international order to counter the dominance of Western values, and to mitigate the threat to the party's legitimacy.

"Western countries use their discourse hegemony to slander China. Negative discourses such as 'China Threat Theory' have seriously damaged China's national image and undermined its power."

To this end, Chinese scholars in the 2000s began to engage more actively with the concept of "discourse power," seeing it as the core philosophical concept around which to build China's external influence strategy. In the scholars' thinking, the strategy is useful for both shaping the world to suit its ambitions and to combat what they saw as hostile Western forces leveraging their dominant position in the current global order to stymie China's rise. In this view, China must come to have its own discourse power on the world stage in order to break the "discourse hegemony" of the West, and to ultimately occupy its rightful place as a leader on the global stage.

China in the 2000s: The Threat of the "Discourse Hegemony" of the West

Some of the earliest Chinese academic writings on "international discourse power" can be traced back to the early 2000s, though the topic gained increasing prominence following China's more assertive foreign policy posture post-2008.

As with most areas of China's domestic and foreign policy, the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP holds the ultimate decision-making power over issues of highest importance; however, the committee often seeks input and advice from a range of experts, specialized institutions, scholars, and interest groups while formulating policy decisions.[26] Such a process of consultation occurred (and continues today) with regard to China shaping its discourse-power strategy.

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21   Zhang Xudong, 全球化时代的文化认同:西方普遍主义话语的历史批判 (Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization: A Historical Critique of the Western Discourse of Universalism) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 18.

22   Zhao Changfeng and Lu Jun, "近年来国内学界关于中国国际话语权研究述评" ("Review of Domestic Academic Research on China's International Discourse Power in Recent Years"), Socialism Studies, September 8, 2018, https://archive.ph/2cf7X.

23   For more on the US "pivot to Asia," see: Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Brookings, December 21, 2011, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/.

Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao, and Shuan Breslin, "Securing China's Core Interests: the State of the Debate in China," International Affairs 91, 2 (2015), 250.

24   "《明镜月刊》獨家全文刊發中共9號文件" ("'Mirror Monthly' Exclusively Publishes the Full Text of the CCP's No. 9 Document"), China Digital Times, September 8, 2013, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/345627.html; "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation," ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation#start.

25   Zhao and Lu, "近年来国内学界关于中国国际话语权研究述评."

26   Note: China's policymaking process is not monolithic but is often the result of bargaining between ministries, state-owned enterprises, and provincial governments with varying degrees of power and sometimes overlapping portfolios with competing interests within the party-state. However, for simplicity's sake, this report uses the term "CCP" to refer to the policies of the party-state. Given that issues of ideological orientation are considered "high politics," the highest levels of the party will ultimately decide the contours of the policy itself. In addition, since 2012, Xi Jinping has taken charge of all foreign policy-related decision-making bodies in an effort to improve coordination among interest groups.

As an example, in May 2022, a public organization supervised by China's United Front Work Department—the CCP's main body responsible for overseeing China's external propaganda efforts, as detailed below—funded a paper written by a professor at China's Central Committee Party School titled "The Improvement of China's International Discourse Power in the New Era Based on International Communication Capacity."[27] In other words, the work of scholars and experts on discourse power is germane to understanding the thinking behind China's strategy, as this research is often requested and solicited on the government's behalf. These findings are then integrated into the policymaking process and inform the contours of the overall discourse-power strategy.

In addition to the contributions of Chinese scholars and experts, China's understanding of discourse power is also informed by Western philosophy. China's conception of discourse power draws heavily from postmodernism, which recognizes that concepts, knowledge, representation, and ideology play an important role in the composition of geopolitical power. This is perhaps best represented in the Chinese discourse-power tradition through the application of French postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault's "discourse power theory" as a frame for understanding what China sees as Western dominance of the international system.[28]

In the Foucauldian view, a state's dominance in the production of knowledge (i.e., values of right and wrong) is linked to geopolitical power. This is because the state can socialize those who receive this knowledge to act in accordance with what it prescribes as acceptable behavior—in other words, to "train" states to adhere to certain norms, i.e., shared expectations about appropriate behavior held by a community of actors.[29] Chinese scholars view the West's ability to dominate the production of knowledge through the use of discourse as central to its dominance of the international system.[30] An example of this, in China's view, is the United States' ability to make "universal values" related to democracy and human rights widely accepted norms for state behavior in the international system.

In addition to norms, China also sees evidence of the discourse power of the United States in its ability to shape international rules and standards. In this view, the current order comprises US-led international political and economic arrangements that determine the rules of how states interact with each other. China sees the United States as having shaped international institutions to project its preferred systems and values, including market capitalism and Western-style participatory democracy. For example, governing principles of Western-created international economic institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, often tie funding and support to countries to reforms that encourage the development of open market economies and democratic governance.[31]

In addition to Western philosophy, Chinese scholarship has also taken inspiration from Maoism to shape understanding of discourse power. In both academic writing and official speeches on the topic, interlocutors often depict the contest over international discourse power as a "public opinion struggle," language that echoes themes prevalent in Maoism. For example, Mao Zedong often spoke in terms of "class struggle," which he viewed as a political process necessary for the transformation of society from capitalism to communism.[32]

In China's view, discourse power is comprised of both the "power to speak," or to articulate a vision for the global order, and the "power to be heard," or to create buy-in for this vision among a global audience.

Discourse power is often described as a similar type of "struggle."[33] Current Chinese President Xi Jinping himself used the term to describe China's discourse-power efforts in June 2021 remarks to the Political Bureau of the CCP's Central Committee, stating that China must emphasize "the strategy and art of public opinion

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27 Liu Jia and Wen Jichang, "国际传播效能视角下的新时代中国国际话语权提升" ("The Improvement of China's International Discourse Power in the New Era—Based on International Communication Capacity"), Journal of Shandon Academy of Governance 1 (2022); "中华思源工程扶贫基金会简介" ("Introduction to China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation"), China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, last visited June 20, 2022, https://archive.ph/SYlwt. The professor serves at the Institute of International Development Strategy of China's Central Committee Party School. The paper was funded under a program of the China Siyuan Project Poverty Alleviation Foundation, a national public-fundraising foundation established in March 2007 under the supervision of the United Front Work Department.

28 Ruan, "话语权与国际秩序的建构."

29 Martha Finnemore, National Interests in International Society (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

30 Ni Shixiong, 当代西方国际关系理论 (Contemporary Western Theory) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2004), 204.

31 G. John Ikenberry and Darren J. Lim, "China's Emerging Institutional Statecraft: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Prospects for Counter-Hegemony," Brookings, April 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/chinas-emerging-institutional-statecraft.pdf.

32 Graham Young, "Mao Zhedong and the Class Struggle in Socialist Society," Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs 16 (1986).

33 Hua Zhengxue, "中国新型政党制度建构国际话语权的三大进路" ("Three Approaches to the Construction of International Discourse Power in China's New Political Party System"), Gansu Political Consultative 1 (2022).

struggle" in order to gain the discourse power needed to shape the international order.[34]

Based, in large part, on their understanding of how the United States was able to transform its discourse dominance into geopolitical power, Chinese thinkers developed the view that an appropriate discourse-power strategy comprises two core components.

First is the "power to speak," or the ability to articulate and disseminate one's interests, values, and vision for the global order on the world stage. Second is the "power to be heard," or the ability to create buy-in for this vision among a global audience through the resonance of one's message. The "power to be heard" rests on embedding cultural values within a system so that it comes to structure the relations between states—through both subjective means (such as norms) and objective means (such as rules and standards). As Chinese scholar Zhang Zhongjun put it, "no matter how high the quality of discourse is, only when it is known by the audience can it have the basis for recognition and then bring about discourse power."[35]

As the above illustrates, China's leadership fundamentally does not believe that the Chinese perspective can be "heard" unless it is able to make the soil fertile globally for its message to take seed. As such, China's discourse-power strategy cannot be understood as simply the power politics of a rising state. Rather, it must be viewed as a serious and disciplined strategy to gain global influence, with the ultimate goal of creating a China-centered alternative international order.

No matter how high the quality of discourse is, only when it is known by the audience can it have the basis for recognition and then bring about discourse power.

China in 2012 and Beyond: Discourse Power in the Xi Jinping Era

The goals of growing international discourse power and shaping the international order reached elevated prominence after Xi Jinping was named general secretary of the CCP during the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. Upon assuming office, Xi proclaimed that the Chinese Dream (中国梦) of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴) was the driving goal of CCP rule for the "New Era."[36] In line with these goals, Xi put forward a number of foreign policy initiatives designed to articulate China's vision for the global order.

In Xi's view, the last century of Chinese history can be divided into three periods: first was the era of Mao Zedong, in which China "stood up" as a country in its own right; second was the Deng Xiaoping-Jiang Zemin-Hu Jintao era of reform and opening, in which China "grew rich"; and last was Xi's tenure, which marks the "New Era" and China's transition from "growing rich" to "growing strong."[37]

Similarly, China's experience during these periods has been characterized by some academics in terms of the "three afflictions" (三挨), or the idea that China, over the past hundred years of its history, has faced three major obstacles to its national power.[38] The first was China's suffering at the hands of foreign aggressors ("中国挨打的问题"), and the second was China's low level of economic development ("中国挨饿的问题"); according to this philosophy, these were overcome by Mao and Deng, respectively. The third affliction occupies the focus of the "New Era" and is China's "suffering of criticism" ("中共政权挨骂的问题") at the hands of the West"—that is, efforts by foreign nations to denigrate and erode the legitimacy of China's political system.[39] In this view, in line with his predecessors, defeating this "third affliction" rests on Xi's shoulders.

The culmination of the "New Era" will be the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049, the year by which Xi has stated China will reach its "national rejuvenation"—which includes reaching global superpower status, and the above aims to "grow strong" and resolve the "third affliction." It also includes other goals, including "resolving the Taiwan question."[40] In short, national rejuvenation would mark China's ascendance to its

34   "习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时强调 加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国" ("During the 30th Collective Study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping Emphasized Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work and Showing a True, Three-Dimensional and Comprehensive China"), Xinhua, June 1, 2021, https://archive.ph/XFwgh.

35   Zhang Zhongjun, "增强中国国际话语权的思考" ("Reflections on Enhancing China's International Discourse Power"), Theoretical Horizon 4 (2012).

36   "习近平关于实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦论述摘编" ("Excerpts from Xi Jinping's Thesis on Realizing the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation"), People's Daily, December 2013, https://archive.ph/nmcml.

37   "Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Latvia, July 1, 2021, https://archive.ph/QFfia.

38   David Bandurski, "CCP Media Policy, Soft Power, and China's 'Third Affliction,'" China Media Project, January 5, 2010, https://chinamediaproject.org/2010/01/05/ccp-media-policy-and-chinas-third-affliction/.

39   Ibid.

40   For more on what achieving the second centenary goal means for Taiwan, see: David Sacks, "What Xi Jinping's Major Speech Means For Taiwan," Council on Foreign Relations, July 6, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-xi-jinpings-major-speech-means-taiwan.

"rightful" position as a global leader that possesses a commensurate level of international discourse power.[41]

Xi's tenure also officially marked China's transition from the more inwardly focused approach of "peaceful development" (和平发展) and taoguangyanghui that characterized the period of reform and opening, to the more outwardly focused "peaceful rise" (和平崛起) and a more "proactive" and "self-achieving" foreign policy—one termed "fengfa youwei" (奋发有为).[42]

Under Xi's leadership, China has launched major policy initiatives and has articulated a Chinese vision of the global order that it hopes to promote as part of its quest to gain discourse power. In 2014, Xi launched his signature foreign policy theme of "Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" (中国特色社会主义大国外交), which—as with the foreign policies of previous leaders—takes as a core tenet the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," a long-standing framework for China's external relations. It includes "mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and cooperation, and peaceful coexistence."[43]

However, in a departure from previous leaders, Xi espouses greater leadership for China in the international community, along with communicating the country's "political ideas, political demands, and national interests" to global audiences.[44] Xi also declared that China must "work to reform the international system and global governance and increase the representation and say of China."[45] Xi has repeatedly emphasized the need to "tell China's story well" (讲好中文故事) on the international stage, and has proposed an alternative set of China-defined values to those of the current Western-led international order. In line with these goals, in 2017, China's Central Party School issued a guide for future diplomacy centered around the idea that China must "guide the international community" to build a "new world order" based on Chinese governance principles.[46]

Numerous workshops, symposiums, and study sessions have been held throughout China across academia and government to operationalize these goals. For example, in an online symposium held in June 2022, experts gathered to contribute concrete proposals to shore up China's international discourse power.[47] In one session, titled "China's International Relations Discourse System Construction and International Communication," contributors emphasized the need to restructure the academic discipline of international relations. They proposed doing so in terms of the "Three Great Systems 三大体系," an understanding of Chinese philosophy and social science that also undergirds Xi's Thought on Diplomacy.

The "Three Great Systems" include the disciplinary system 学科体系 (which involves training young talent in the practice of policy and international diplomacy), the academic system 学术体系 (shoring up and innovating the theory and philosophy behind China's approach to international relations), and the discourse system 话语体系 (developing and utilizing mechanisms for spreading China's approach to international relations to a global audience).[48] These proposals are aimed at cultivating the skill sets of young people to prepare the future generation to meet the needs of China's discourse-power goals.[49]

China further institutionalized and formalized its approach to discourse power at the 19th National Congress in 2018, where Xi established "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), a guiding document that codified his "Major Country Diplomacy" and outlined concrete goals toward "building a new type of international relations." As part of these efforts, China has repeatedly emphasized its goals to reform the global governance system and to create "a community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) based on respect for "sovereignty, dignity, territorial integrity, development path, social systems, and 'core interests.'"[50]

41 "习近平关于实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦论述摘编."

42 Yan Xuetong, "从韬光养晦到奋发有为" ("From Hide One's Capabilities and Bide One's Time to Becoming Industrious and Promising"), Quarterly Journal of International Politics 4 (2014).

43 Xi Jinping, "Carry Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence To Build a Better World Through Win-Win Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 1, 2014, https://archive.ph/4FXDt.

44 Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies" in Scott D. McDonald and Michael C. Burgoyne, eds., China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations, APCSS, September 2019, https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2-Xis_Vision_for_transforming_Global-Governance-Tobin.pdf.

45 "The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs was Held in Beijing," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 29, 2014, https://archive.ph/MPn3s.

46 "习近平首提'两个引导'有深意" ("Xi Jinping's First Mention of 'Two Guides' Has Deep Meaning"), People's Daily, February 20, 2017, https://archive.ph/1WNWA.

47 "习近平外交思想研究与中国国际问题三大体系建设专题研讨会线上召开" ("Symposium on Research on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and Construction of China's Three Major Systems of International Issues Held Online"), Guangming Net-Academic Channel, June 1, 2022, https://archive.ph/wNvVW.

48 Zhang Zhenjiang, "中国国际关系学科建设的应然与实然" ("What Should Be Done in China's International Relations Discipline Construction"), Aisixiang, June 2, 2022, https://archive.ph/wDgFd; Tuvia Gering, "Discourse Power," Discourse Power, June 16, 2022, https://tuviagering.substack.com/p/discourse-power-june-16-2022.

49 For more on the "Three Systems," see: Tuvia Gering, "Discourse Power," Discourse Power, July 18, 2022, https://tuviagering.substack.com/p/discourse-power-july-18-2022.

50 Xi Jinping, "Work Together to Build the Belt and Road" in Governance of China Vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai Press, 2018), 559.

This language is meant to articulate to a global audience China's vision for international relations, and to stand in contrast to that of the order supported by the United States and Western countries. For example, China emphasizes a multilateral approach to international relations as an alternative to what it claims is a "unilateral" approach taken by the United States. Chinese "multilateralism" is a form of engagement that privileges state-to-state interactions over multistakeholder approaches to rule-making, and one that aims to exclude non-state and civil-society actors.[51]

Similarly, under these new foreign policy frameworks, China has sought to promote its own concepts as alternatives to the Western norms it sees as structuring the current international system. For example, China has championed a definition of "human rights" that actively subordinates personal and civic freedoms in favor of state-centered economic development. That is, in China's view, "human rights" has come to mean the right of every country to pursue a development path that suits its "national conditions," in contrast to the Western-centric definition that emphasizes civil and personal liberties.[52] Similarly, China's emphasis on "non-interference" and respect for "core interests" in other countries' internal affairs is meant to communicate a willingness to engage in relationships and exchanges without consideration for a country's internal political systems.[53]

In China's view, "human rights" has come to mean the right of every country to pursue a development path that suits its "national conditions," in contrast to the Western-centric definition that emphasizes civil and personal liberties.

China often tailors its messaging about its norms to its audience. In the Global South especially, this messaging often overtly criticizes the United States while elevating China's approach to international relations. For example, in the Middle East, China often emphasizes its principle of noninterference, contrasting its role with that of Western countries, given the latter's history of intervention in the region. For example, following the United States' Summit for Democracy in December 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi took the opportunity to emphasize solidarity with Middle Eastern countries in opposition to the United States, stating: "The United States instigates regime change by engaging in color revolutions and seeks geopolitical interests through military intervention at every turn [....] The 'Arab Spring' promoted in the name of fake democracy has instead caused millions of casualties and displacement of tens of millions of people [...] China and Middle Eastern countries should firmly follow their own path."[54]

Similarly, at a speech to the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) on November 29, 2021, Xi Jinping promoted China's aim to build a "community with a shared future for mankind" in Africa.[55] Xi said China's cooperation with African countries would not hinge on Western notions of "so-called human rights" that violate the sovereign right of countries to determine their own "internal affairs."[56] As Xi declared, "[both China and Africa] advocate for a development path that suits our own national conditions...and both oppose interference in internal affairs, racial discrimination and unilateral sanctions."[57]

As highlighted in the examples above, China sees the regions of the Global South as an important vector for gaining discourse power. Zhang Zhizhou, one of the most influential Chinese scholars on discourse-power strategy, argues that Western cultures will not accept China's governance principles due to the incongruence between Chinese and "Western Christian ideology," stating that "the natural difference between Chinese culture and Christian civilization will directly reduce the degree of Chinese discourse accepted by the world."[58] This is why China views the Global South as one of the prime areas in which it can gain discourse power; it sees a common experience of "developing countries" as holding powerful appeal in spreading its governance principles.[59]

In light of the above, China's strategy around discourse power should not be understood as an attempt to turn the world into an authoritarian stage. China is clear in emphasizing its agnosticism with regard to the domestic political characteristics of the governments with which it engages.[60]

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51 Zhang Qingmin, "China's Multilateral Diplomacy," IDEES, July 24, 2021, https://revistaidees.cat/en/chinas-multilateral-diplomacy/.

52 Kenton Thibaut, China's Discourse Power Operations in the Global South, Atlantic Council, April 20, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinas-discourse-power-operations-in-the-global-south/.

53 Ibid.

54 "坚定自主自立信念 走团结自强之路" ("Firmly Believe in Self-Reliance and Take the Road of Unity and Self-Improvement"), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 15, 2022, https://archive.ph/9RvdQ.

55 "Full Text: Keynote Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Opening Ceremony of 8th FOCAC Ministerial Conference," Xinhua, December 2, 2021, https://archive.fo/ODK6H.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Zhang Zhizhou, "国际话语权建设中几大基础性理论问题." ("Several Basic Theoretical Issues in the Construction of International Discourse Power"), Study Times, 2017.

59 Thibaut, China's Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.

60 "Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development."

To this end, it is less important to China why countries support its vision for a global order than whether they simply do so. In either case, China gains discourse power by increasing buy-in for its vision for the global order, bringing it closer to achieving its aims of gaining a comparative advantage over the West.

China's strategy should not be understood as an attempt to turn the world into an authoritarian stage. China is agnostic with regard to the political systems of its interlocutors. It is less important to Beijing why countries support its aims, than that they simply do so.

China has also proffered alternative international institutional arrangements to facilitate the spread of its values, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi launched the BRI in 2013 as his signature foreign policy program and infrastructure-investment initiative. In China's view, the BRI functions as a normative framework, as it operates under the principles of China's "five principles of peaceful coexistence," as well as a structural one, providing an institutional arrangement to facilitate China's external propaganda efforts.[61]

As an example, at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, Xi emphasized China's intentions to "foster a new model of international relations" under the auspices of the BRI. As one report urged in 2018, "we must firmly seize the historic opportunity of the 'Belt and Road', deconstruct the discourse hegemony of Western developed countries [...] and truly realize the rise of China's international discourse power."[62] As of March 2022, one hundred and forty-six countries had signed memoranda of understanding for BRI-affiliated projects.[63] Under Xi, China has developed and deployed a number of external initiatives designed to gain the discourse power appropriate for its "New Era." However, at the same time, China has also embarked on a major restructuring of the party-state that centers the party at the heart of its discourse-power strategy.

China's Internal Reorganization and Its Discourse-Power Goals

The drive to consolidate CCP oversight over the organizations responsible for discourse power is captured by the concept of "top-level design" (顶层设计), a development approach that has gained prominence in China's political life under Xi. Top-level design orients the entirety of China's social, economic, security, and political apparatus in a policy hierarchy with the CCP's Central Committee at the top—which, in turn, is led by Xi Jinping.[64]

Top-level design plays a key role in China's discourse-power goals, including in its 14th Five Year Plan and its long-term goals for 2035, which include taking its "rightful" place as a global power.[65] As Dai Yanjun, a professor at China's Central Party School, expressed in a November 2020 interview, top-level design means that, in all of China's domestic and global activities, the country will adopt a whole-of-society approach oriented toward "ensuring the leadership of the Communist Party of China and [...] reflecting the superiority of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics."[66]

Indeed, since coming to power in 2012, Xi has sought to bolster the CCP's authority over all aspects of the party-state, and the 2018 Congress saw the announcement of a major reorganization that would place the party at the center of control across a wide variety of departments and bureaucracies. The goal was to "strengthen the Party's unified and centralized control" over the direction and operation of the country, with "the leadership of Xi Jinping" as the core.[67]

The Central Committee oversees the main bodies of the party-state that ensure party priorities regarding international discourse power are translated through to policy guidance. In effect, this means that any of the policymaking bodies or bureaucratic entities that are responsible for disseminating propaganda—or implementing any other policy tool used

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61 Xi Jinping, "Work Together to Build a 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" in Governance of China Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Press, 2015), 320–324.

62 Chen Zhengliang, Zhou Jie, and Li Baogeng, "国际话语权本质析论—兼论中国在提升国际话语权上的应有作为" ("An Analysis of the Nature of International Discourse Power—China's Due Action in Improving International Discourse Power"), Zhejiang Social Sciences 7 (2014).

63 "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Green Finance & Development Center, last visited June 2, 2022, https://archive.ph/2ul86.

64 Hu Nan and Zhang Dongyue, "把加强顶层设计和坚持问计于民统一起来—访中共中央党校（国家行政学院）教授戴焰军" ("Unify Strengthening Top-Level Design and Insisting on Asking People—Interview with Dai Yanjun, a Professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (National School of Administration)"), Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and State Supervision Commission, November 26, 2020, https://archive.ph/s8W53.

65 Chinese leadership's plan for China's development from 2021 to 2025. Topics covered are broad, and include near-term PRC economic, trade, science and technology, defense, political, social, cultural, environmental, and other policy priorities. "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和 2035 年　景目标纲要" ("Outline of the People's Republic of China 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035"), CSET, May 12, 2021, https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0284_14th_Five_Year_Plan_EN.pdf.

66 Hu and Zhang, "把加强顶层设计和坚持问计于民统一起来."

67 See: Susan V. Lawrence, China's Communist Party Absorbs More of the State, CRS, IF10854, March 23, 2018, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10854/2; "中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》" ("CPC Central Committee Releases 'Deepening Party and State Institutional Reform Plan'"), Xinhua, March 21, 2018, https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/ccp-central-committee-publishes-plan-for-deepening-the-reform-of-party-and-state-agencies/; "《中共中央关于深化党和国家机构改革的决定》和《深化党和国家机构改革方案》诞生记" ("An Account of the Birth of the CPC Central Committee Decision on Deepening Party and State Institutional Reform and the Deepening Party and State Institutional Reform Plan"), Xinhua, March 22, 2018, https://archive.ph/qnrrH.

to gain discourse power—must adhere to the policies and overarching strategy from the Central Committee. This represents a shift away from the pre-Xi Jinping era, in which policy decision-making was more decentralized, to one marked by increasing consolidation under the Central Committee.[68]

The Primary Bodies Tasked with Enhancing China's Power to Speak

As mentioned above, in China's view, the "power to speak" includes the ability to articulate a coherent vision for the world order. It is China's proposition for what the world should look like and for how governments should interact with each other. As part of its reorganization, China has designated specific departments as responsible for ensuring the party's vision is translated down into policy. As one of the leading Chinese scholars on discourse power wrote, "behind the power to speak is the strength of the Party, which must coordinate all efforts."[69]

The primary bodies tasked with enhancing China's "power to speak" include the following.

- **Central Propaganda Department (CPD)**. The CPD is one of the most important organizations in China's discourse-power strategy. It is responsible for developing China's "ideological orientation," and for making sure this work flows through to all of the party-state's propaganda work. For example, the CPD is responsible for regulating the content of China's publishing, news media, and film industries, and for providing content directives for Chinese state media organizations like People's Daily and Xinhua.[70] In March 2018, Xinhua announced that the CPD would oversee a new network, Voice of China, formed by the merger of China Central Television (CCTV). Its remit includes "strengthening international [discourse power] by telling China's stories well."[71]

- **The United Front Work Department (UFWD).** Similarly, the UFWD is responsible for translating party guidance on discourse-power priorities into external propaganda strategies for use in China's international communication work. For example, in a speech at the Central United Front Work Conference in May 2015, Xi emphasized

the UFWD's importance in improving China's discourse-power work by providing feedback from its external discussion and exchange activities.[72] The UFWD is also a core organization in enhancing China's "power to be heard," described in more detail below.

- **Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CAC).** To help guide China's propaganda work in the online sphere, the CAC dictates many of the regulations and guidelines that control how China's external propaganda flows through platforms to reach its intended audiences. The CAC is also responsible for overseeing much of the work in China's 14th Five-Year-Plan on "promoting the construction of a community of common destiny in cyberspace" by encouraging "international cooperation," and by formulating international rules and digital technology standards that China can then promote in international forums and in its international exchanges.[73]

- **Foreign Affairs Commission (FAC).** The FAC is responsible for formulating China's state-to-state diplomatic strategy in a way that aligns with party priorities, including on its discourse-power-related goal of "telling China's story well." In a shift from previous years, the FAC has played an increasingly prominent role in the oversight of China's diplomacy, as power has shifted away from the state body in charge of diplomatic affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). One such indicator is that current Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi is not China's chief diplomat, a role that instead falls to FAC General Office Director Yang Jiechi.[74] This is an example of the consolidation of discourse-power work under the party during Xi Jinping's tenure.

- **Political Work Force of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).** In addition to party and state agencies, the PLA also plays an important role in policy guidance for China's discourse-power-related work. The PLA houses the Political Work Force, a "storytelling" entity responsible for developing discourse-power strategies for burnishing the image of the PLA and amplifying positive stories about the CCP, both domestically and internationally. According to limited news coverage, these entities also house the Network Systems Department, which is responsible for developing and implementing cyber- and information-warfare capabilities.[75]

68   Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Foreign and Security Policy Institutions and Decision-Making under Xi Jinping," British Journal of Politics and International Relations 23, 2 (2021).
69   Zhang, "国际话语权建设中几大基础性理论问题."
70   Xinhua, "中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》" ("CPC Central Committee Releases 'Deepening Party and State Institutional Reform Plan'"), State Council of the People's Republic of China, March 21, 2018, https://archive.ph/qoiPK; "CCP Central Committee Publishes Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Agencies," Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET), March 18, 2021, https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/ccp-central-committee-publishes-plan-for-deepening-the-reform-of-party-and-state-agencies/.
71   "组建中央广播电视总台，撤销央视、央广等建制" ("The Central Radio and Television Station was Established, and the Establishment of CCTV, CCTV, etc. was Abolished"), Xinhua, March 21, 2018, https://archive.ph/6Qewi.
72   "固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线" ("Xi Jinping: Consolidate and Develop the Broadest Patriotic United Front"), Xinhua, May 20, 2015, https://archive.ph/Dl6Qw.
73   "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和 2035 年景目标纲要."
74   Cabestan, "China's Foreign and Security Policy Institutions and Decision-Making under Xi Jinping"; "Top Diplomat Yang Jiechi Warns the US Against Playing 'Taiwan Card,' Vows China's Firm Actions to Safeguard Sovereignty in Phone Talk with Sullivan," Global Times, May 19, 2022, https://archive.ph/08bEE.
75   John Costello and Joe McReynolds, China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2018).

"A fierce battle has begun in the global public opinion field. This battle is manifested as a struggle for discourse power between Western political parties, led by the United States, and the world's progressive parties represented by the CCP. This struggle is not only a moral confrontation, but also a strategic game."

The agencies listed above help to ensure that China's discourse-power operations adhere to party priorities, and that various strategies follow the correct "direction." However, just as important as this internal policy-defining function are the external communication and dissemination of Chinese concepts to a broader international audience, which undergird China's "power to be heard."

The bodies tasked with enhancing China's "power to be heard" engage in a variety of tactics for disseminating external propaganda, and for seeking to create buy-in among audiences for China's messaging. As described above, in China's view, gaining support from external audiences is central for embedding its cultural values within the international system; they then come to structure relations between states through norms (subjective values), as well as rules and standards (objective values).

One such tactic is "engaging in public opinion battles." Since assuming office in 2012, Xi has repeatedly emphasized the need to engage in and win "public opinion battles" in the fight to gain international discourse power.[76] The militaristic overtones of this phrasing are captured in the People's Liberation Army's "Political Work Regulations," which outline "public opinion warfare" as one of the three main types of political combat styles (along with psychological warfare and information warfare) that will take place under "information-alized conditions."[77]

The goal of public opinion warfare is to shape global public opinion to gain international support for China, so that—in the event of a conflict—China can "coerce opponents into compliance without having to go to war."[78] As one academic studying methods for Beijing to improve discourse power put it:

"In the global public opinion field, a fierce battle of public opinion has just begun and will last for a long time in the future. This fierce battle of public opinion is manifested as a struggle for discourse power between Western political parties led by the United States and the world's progressive parties represented by the Communist Party of China. This struggle is not only a moral confrontation, but also a strategic game."[79]

In addition to engaging in public opinion warfare, agencies tasked with enhancing China's "power to be heard" are also encouraged to develop contacts and networks abroad that can serve as local advocates for Chinese narratives. In April 2021, the CPD released a document outlining the importance of this tactic in China's international discourse-power work. The CPD released the "Propaganda and Ideological Work in the New Era" (新时代宣传思想工作), essentially a blueprint outlining the policy guidelines and aims of China's "internal and external propaganda work" within the emerging geopolitical environment.

Chapter 10 of the document, on external propaganda, outlines the party's need to develop "international discourse power" and defines developing a "circle of international influencers" as a central strategy for achieving this goal. As the CPD put it, China must "establish extensive international contacts, make a group of good 'friends' among foreign politicians, parliamentary political parties, business elites, celebrities from all walks of life, and non-governmental organizations [...] and [use this] circle of influencers to spread [...] China to all parts of the world."[80]

The United Front Work Department, outlined above and again below, is tasked with developing this network of influencers. The types of influencers China seeks to capture are diverse—including scholars, politicians, government officials, businesspeople, and domestic actors who may serve as advocates for Chinese policies, and who may serve to further Chinese interests.[81] Xi emphasized the importance of this work in a Central Committee speech from May 2021, in which he stated that China must "expand [its] international communication through international influencers," adding

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76   "以舆情管理之功完善社会治理体系" ("Improve the Social Governance System with the Power of Public
      Opinion Management"), Light of Theory, July 7, 2020, https://archive.ph/2rzuA.

77   Dean Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: Chinese Public Opinion Warfare and the Need for a Robust American Response," Heritage Foundation,
      November 26, 2012, https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/winning-without-fighting-chinese-public-opinion-warfare-and-the-need-robust-american.

78   Ibid.

79   Jia Wenshan, "全面提升国际话语权的中国探索" ("China's Exploration of Comprehensively
      Enhancing International Discourse Power"), People's Tribune 29 (2021).

80   "《新时代宣传思想工作》第十章 对外宣传工作" ("'Propaganda and Ideological Work in the New Era' Chapter 10
      External Propaganda Work"), Central Party School Publishing, April 6, 2021, https://archive.ph/B8SlE.

81   Lin Ping, "习近平新时代中国特色社会主义统战思想的鲜明特点" ("Distinctive Features of Xi Jinping's Socialist United Front
      Thought with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era"), Journal of Guangdong Institute of Socialism 1 (2018).

that these "foreign influencers" will be the country's "top soldiers of propaganda against the enemy."[82]

Alongside identifying core tactics, China's leadership has also identified the regions of the Global South as areas of particular opportunity for gaining the "power to be heard." China sees the Global South as a target for spreading its narrative-framing and governance principles, and as attractive markets for Chinese infrastructure offerings through platforms like the BRI.

In an influential essay on the topic, published in Xinhua in February 2017, China scholar He Jianhua wrote that, in order to overcome the discourse deficit of "the West is strong while China is weak" ("西强我弱"), China must "find the right entry points" for its narratives and make them the focus of their efforts.[83] He identified the United Nations, as well as messaging in the Global South around human rights and China's successes in development, as such "entry points." He wrote that development is "the most important entry point and focus for enhancing China's international influence as quickly as possible. Because in this field, China has little political resistance, many friends, and fruitful results, which can quickly have an impact."[84]

"Developing countries in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America are natural allies of China's diplomacy."

For example, China engages in external propaganda messaging that seeks to erode the legitimacy of the liberal democratic framework while gaining support for Beijing's own international governance model. It does so by crafting narratives that resonate with target audiences by emphasizing a shared distrust of Western governments, that criticize Western interventionism, or that emphasize a shared experience as "developing countries" (to use China's term).

One Chinese scholar writes that these shared experiences make "developing countries in the Middle East and North

Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America" "natural allies" of China's diplomacy.[85] Organizations such as the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and others are viewed as primary platforms for disseminating Chinese norms, and as best positioned to assert China's leadership, allowing Beijing to "build China's international united front and strive for more international discourse rights."[86]

In short, China sees its power to be heard as relying, in large part, on the resonance of its messaging; it deploys this messaging by engaging in public opinion battles and expanding its circle of "foreign influencers." In doing so, it aims to gain the support it sees as necessary for shaping a new international order.

To this end, a number of party-state, academic, commercial, and other actors have been tasked by the party to enhance China's "power to be heard."

- **United Front Work Department (UFWD).** Referenced in the "power to speak" list above, the UFWD is also largely responsible for developing the "network of China influencers" essential for gaining support for China's vision for the global order. The UFWD has been greatly ramping up its external propaganda efforts in recent years. Under Xi, the UFWD added more than forty thousand new members in the first few years after 2012.[87] A Jamestown Foundation report estimated that "organizations central to China's national and regional united front systems spent more than $2.6 billion in 2019 alone, exceeding funding for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs," with almost a quarter of these funds earmarked for external propaganda.[88] China created the leading small group on United Front Work in 2015 with Xi leading it, ensuring the Central Committee directly oversees its work.[89]

  As part of their efforts to win influencers for China, UFWD organizations will often host conferences or events dedicated to promoting Chinese governance principles. For example, each year, the UFWD of Zhejiang province co-hosts the World Zhejiang Business Conference. Attendees in 2019 included more than two thousand senior party officials, Zhejiang businessmen, representatives of China's major state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and industry associations in China, Fortune 500

82 "习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时强调 加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国" ("During the 30th Collective Study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping Emphasized Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work and Showing a True, Three-Dimensional and Comprehensive China"), Xinhua, June 1, 2021, https://archive.ph/XFwgh.

83 He Jianhua, "西强我弱国际话语格局怎样改变" ("How to Change the International Discourse Pattern of 'The West Is Strong and I Am Weak'"), Xinhua, February 15, 2017, http://web.archive.org/web/20200810013119/http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/15/c_1120468174.htm.

84 Ibid.

85 Xiao Xi and Yang Yizhong, "新形势下世界'中国观'的变化与加快构建中国国际话语权的战略路径" ("Changes in the World's 'China View' under the New Situation and the Strategic Path to Accelerate the Construction of China's International Discourse Power"), Jilin University Journal Social Sciences 62, 1 (2022).

86 Ibid.

87 Gerry Groot, "The Expansion of the United Front Under Xi Jinping," China Story, 2015, https://www.thechinastory. org/yearbooks/yearbook-2015/forum-ascent/the-expansion-of-the-united-front-under-xi-jinping/.

88 Ryan Fedasiuk, "Putting Money in the Party's Mouth: How China Mobilizes Funding for United Front Work," CSET, September 16, 2020, https://cset.georgetown.edu/article/putting-money-in-the-partys-mouth-how-china-mobilizes-funding-for-united-front-work/.

89 Groot, "The Expansion of the United Front Under Xi Jinping."

companies, foreign experts and scholars, and representatives from foreign industry, business, academia, and government. The main goals of the convention include "comprehensively deepening exchanges and cooperation between Zhejiang and the rest of the world" in order to "promote the achievements of [China's] development model and the glory of its national strength."[90]

- **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).** The CPPCC is a consultative political body comprising more than two thousand representatives from different sectors of Chinese society. It is supervised by the UFWD and liaises with non-CCP members to advance party interests.[91] The CPPCC is chaired by the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of overseeing UFWD operations. According to China's constitution, one of the CPPCC's main tasks is to create an "Influencer Sphere" (朋友圈) for China. The BRI is a locus of activity for various UFWD organizations, including the CPPCC, as it represents both a platform for fostering China's economic development and a way to "expand united front activities to a global scale."[92] In 2015, the UFWD instructed lower-level departments to focus on influence activities that would advance economic cooperation among the BRI and to "create favorable international environment through propaganda and exchange activities."[93] Part of these efforts involves expanding China's circle of influence, with which the CPPCC is tasked, thus increasing China's power to be heard.

- **International Liaison Department (ILD).** The ILD conducts party-to-party exchanges on behalf of the CCP. It popularizes and promotes CCP discourse-power concepts and policies to socialist political parties. As of 2020, China's ILD claims to have established relationships with more than six hundred political parties and organizations from more than one hundred and sixty countries. For example, in Latin America, China's ILD convened more than three hundred meetings with more than seventy-four political groups across the region during a fifteen-year period beginning in 2002.[94] These engagements focused on gaining political support for China's activities and initiatives along the BRI, proselytizing the

efficacy of its governance system, and spreading positive messages about China's role in global governance.[95]

As with the work of the UFWD, the BRI provides an important organizing function for the activities of the ILD. In March 2018, Minister of the ILD Song Tao highlighted that the ILD's role was to spearhead an initiative to build a "community of common destiny" among countries in the BRI and with political parties around the globe, a "new type of political party relationship" that reflects the "new type of international relations" on which China's vision for a new global order is built.[96] Each year, the ILD hosts a "Chinese Communist Party and World Political Parties High-level Dialogue" in Beijing. In January 2020, delegates representing more than two hundred political parties and organizations from more than one hundred and twenty countries attended the meeting. The event included panels, closed-door discussions, and exchanges between participants on topics including the role of political parties in "jointly pursuing the BRI," among others.[97]

- **Universities and think tanks.** Universities and think tanks facilitate international exchange programs and other cooperation projects, most often under the auspices of the BRI. In doing so, they help to promote Chinese conceptions of global governance. In 2018, then Secretary of the Party Committee of Peking University Hao Ping pledged the university would "make good use of various international talent training platforms and international exchange platforms to cultivate outstanding talents [...] and lay a solid foundation for China's [governance concepts] through [their] integration."[98] Renmin University Party Secretary Jin Nuo and Tsinghua University Party Secretary Chen Xu made similar pledges, with Nuo stating the university would work to "actively serve the country's diplomatic needs, attract more foreign students to China, and help more young people to expand their international horizons," and Chen stating Tsinghua would "encourage teachers and students to play a role in international scientific research cooperation, think tank construction, academic organization and standard setting" in service of China's discourse-power goals.[99]

90 "世界浙商大会" ("The World Zhejiang Entrepreneurs Convention"), Baidu Baike, last updated May 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/Z9alZ.
91 Alex Joske, "The Party Speaks for You," ASPI, June 9, 2020, 5, https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you.
92 Lin, "习近平新时代中国特色社会主义统战思想的鲜明特点."
93 Yang Weimin, "'一带一路'战略与海外统一战线的拓展——以浙江实践为例" ("'The Belt and Road' Strategy and the Expansion of the Overseas United Front—Taking the Practice of Zhejiang as an Example"), Journal of Chongqing Institute of Socialism 87, 4 (2016).
94 "中联部简介: 我部简介," International Department, Central Committee of the CPC, https://archive.ph/aFVh7; Ryan C. Berg and Thiago de Aragão, "Is Latin America Important to China's Foreign Policy?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 9, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/latin-america-important-chinas-foreign-policy.
95 Ibid.
96 "政党携手，共铸人类命运共同体" ("Political Parties Join Hands to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind"), Sohu, February 13, 2018, https://archive.ph/c00W0.
97 "中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会" ("High-level Dialogue between the Communist Party of China and the World Political Parties"), Keywords to Understand China, January 19, 2020, https://archive.ph/ZATBC.
98 "政党携手," Sohu.
99 Ibid.

- **Industry associations and commercial actors.** The CPD describes firms as "irreplaceable" in conducting external propaganda work and spreading norms of Chinese governance, and claims that the BRI especially has given Chinese-funded enterprises the "wings to go global."[100] Discussing guidelines for firm behavior, the CPD urges Chinese-funded enterprises to be "proactive in publicity" and to "create a corporate image of compliant operation, honesty and trustworthiness, and enthusiasm for public welfare, as well as a brand image of independent innovation and excellent quality."[101]

- **Multilateral and regional organizations.** China often leverages multilateral organizations to win over international "influencers" who understand their domestic environments and are able to promote Chinese concepts locally.[102] As outlined in previous DFRLab reports, this strategy is what Chinese scholars call the "subcutaneous injection (皮下注射)" theory of communications, which holds that local influencers are able to ensure a more rapid dissemination of Chinese concepts in a particular region.[103] China has been deepening its engagement in regional organizations over the past two decades. For example, Dawn Murphy traces China's post-2000 engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East through the establishment of two regional organizations, FOCAC in 2000 and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004, and the use of these platforms to advocate "for changes to [some] norms of the current order, including those related to democracy promotion and human rights."[104]

- **Media organizations.** These agencies are responsible for much of the external propaganda work core to China's "power to be heard," and for engaging in the "public opinion struggles" mentioned by Xi and described above. The CPD is responsible for directing the propaganda work of the government bodies involved in the broadcast media aspect of this "public opinion" struggle, including Xinhua

In Latin America, the CCP's International Liaison Department convened more than three hundred meetings with more than seventy-four political groups from 2002-2017. These engagements focused on gaining support for the BRI, and spreading positive messages about China's socialist system and its role in global governance.

News Agency, China Media Group, and the National Press and Publication Administration. The CCP's newspaper, the *People's Daily,* was also placed under Xinhua management, partly in an effort to "improve the quality ofexternal propaganda."[105]

- **The State Council Information Office (SCIO).** The SCIO (also known as the Central Office of Foreign Propaganda) is overseen by China's State Council, and is tasked with "telling a positive China story to the world," including publicizing and promoting Chinese governance norms.[106] The SCIO oversees the national English-language state-run news publication *China Daily*, which, like the CPD-run Xinhua, has signed content-sharing agreements with local media organizations in other countries, with a recent focus on countries connected to the BRI.[107] *China Daily* also works alongside national and local-level propaganda departments to organize platforms like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Media & Think Tank Roundtable Forum, which, among other aims, popularizes Chinese governance concepts to Asian audiences that include officials, ambassadors, media representatives, businesspersons, and scholars.[108]

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100 "《新时代宣传思想工作》第十章 对外宣传工作."

101 Ibid.

102 Zhao Xinli, "积极通过国际友人开展国际传播" ("Actively Carry out International Communication through International Friends"), Public Diplomacy Quarterly 3 (2021), https://caod.oriprobe.com/articles/62415542/ji_ji_tong_guo_guo_ji_you_ren_kai_zhan_guo_ji_chua.htm.

103 Thibaut, China's Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.

104 Dawn C. Murphy, China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 5.

105 Zhao, "积极通过国际友人开展国际传播."

106 Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition, Atlantic Council, December 2020, 1–25, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/China-Discouse-Power-FINAL.pdf.

107 Sarah Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017," Freedom House, January 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/01152020_SR_China_Global_Megaphone_with_Recommendations_PDF.pdf.

108 "RCEP Media & Think Tank Forum," China Daily, last visited June 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/xt6Vo.

HOW CHINA HAS CENTERED CONNECTIVITY IN ITS DISCOURSE-POWER AMBITIONS

China's leadership has been transparent in both outlining its goals for gaining discourse power and implementing a strategy for doing so. However, in recent years, Chinese official and academic writings also show that the CCP has come to see the digital arena as crucial in its discourse-power strategy, seeing the opportunities brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution as offering a chance to overcome its current discourse-power deficit and gain a strategic advantage over the United States.

As one Chinese government official wrote in July 2020, "technological changes in different periods throughout history not only bring about economic changes, but also affect changes in the global power structure [...]The digital economy is prompting a reshuffle, and China has the opportunity to gain a first-mover advantage."[109] Beijing has made clear its intentions to command the digital world, announcing its aims to dominate advanced-technology manufacturing by 2025, to lead in international standards setting by 2035, and to become a "cyber superpower" by 2050.[110]

These goals are supported by a number of major policy initiatives. These include, among others, "Made in China 2025," passed in 2015, which outlined China's ambitions to transition from the world's factory to a lead supplier and developer of advanced technologies by 2025; the "National Informatization Development Strategy (2016-2020)," which urged companies to invest abroad to support China's Digital Silk Road; and the Ministry of Science and Technology's "Notice on the Publication of the Guidance on National New Generation Artificial Intelligence Open Innovation Platform Construction Work" (科技部关于印发《国家新一代人工智能开放创新平台建设工作指引》的通知), which provides guidelines for Chinese companies to build open innovation platforms to develop AI technologies.[111]

To facilitate the implementation of these policies, China has also passed a number of laws that grant the CCP expanded oversight of the mechanisms of the digital economy. The Cyber Security Law, implemented in 2017, grants the Chinese government extensive power to control and request access to information held by firms within its borders.[112] Article 2 of the law states that it applies to Chinese companies abroad, as well as those operating domestically. Similarly, the Personal Information Protection Law (中华人民共和国个人信息保护法), which took effect in November 2021, provides no protection against government access to private information, and citizens must still provide their data if they are designated as being in the interest of China's national security.[113]

In support of its ambitions to become a cyber superpower, China has developed a concerted strategy to gain international discourse power via the digital domain. It has done so by using social and digital media of all varieties to seed its influence, and by shaping the governance of the digital infrastructure upon which these platforms are built and run through the promotion of CCP-approved norms.

> **"Technological changes in different periods throughout history not only bring about economic changes, but also affect changes in the global power structure...The digital economy is prompting a reshuffle, and China has the opportunity to gain a first-mover advantage."**

As detailed below, China has envisioned and developed a concerted strategy designed to center itself at the heart of a digitally connected world. China's leadership believes that by centering Beijing in this way, it can achieve its goals of shifting the global order to further ensure the continued power of the CCP.

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109 Chen, "陈文辉详解数字经济投资逻辑：得平台者得天下."

110 Hillman, The Digital Silk Road, xii.

111 James McBride and Andrew Chatzky, "Is 'Made in China 2025' a Threat to Global Trade?" Council on Foreign Relations, May 13, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/made-china-2025-threat-global-trade; Rogier Creemers, "Outline of the National Informatization Development Strategy," Digichina, July 27, 2016, https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/outline-of-the-national-informatization-development-strategy; "科技部关于印发《国家新一代人工智能开放创新平台建设工作指引》的通知" ("Notice on the Publication of the Guidance on National New Generation Artificial Intelligence Open Innovation Platform Construction Work"), State Council of the People's Republic of China, August 4, 2019, https://archive.ph/QHdZR.

112 Daniel Rechtschaffen, "Why China's Data Regulations Are a Compliance Nightmare for Companies," Diplomat, June 27, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/why-chinas-data-regulations-are-a-compliance-nightmare-for-companies/.

113 "Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China," National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, December 29, 2021, http://web.archive.org/web/20220113105908/http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2021-12/29/c_694559.htm.

Discourse Power in the Digital Domain: Using Social and Digital Media to Shape Local Information Environments

One primary way in which China aims to gain the "power to speak" and the "power to be heard" in the digital realm is by leveraging social and other media platforms to shape local information environments by spreading pro-China propaganda, engaging in transnational repression to suppress potential detractors, and otherwise shaping the information environment to suit its priorities.

China's view of the utility and timeliness of this approach is spelled out plainly in an April 2021 guiding policy document released by the CPD on shoring up China's "external public opinion work." The document stated that "the rapid development of the internet has accelerated the process of networkization and digitization of the international mainstream media. The internet is reshaping the international public opinion pattern and the international media ecology and has increasingly become an important battlefield for major powers to compete for discourse power."[114]

These views are also reflected in Chinese scholarly writings, including those funded by Chinese state and party bodies for the express purpose of developing strategies to gain discourse power.[115] These works expound extensively on the utility of new Internet and information technologies for enhancing China's discourse power, describing them as having become "key carriers for the dissemination of mainstream ideological discourse."[116]

China sees gaining proficiency in these platforms as an opportunity to overcome Western dominance of the media system. In the Chinese view, the dominant position of Western countries in international communication has cemented their international discourse dominance. As one scholar bemoaned, "Western countries, relying on the communication systems constructed by news media such as CNN and BBC and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, exert extensive and huge discourse influence in the world, and these discourses carry a large number of Western values."[117]

Picking up on this theme in a June 2021 speech to the Central Committee, Xi urged the party to "carefully build a foreign discourse system, give full play to the role of emerging media, enhance the creativity, appeal, and credibility of foreign discourse, tell Chinese stories, spread Chinese voices, and explain Chinese characteristics well."[118] A state-funded study of ways to enhance China's discourse power noted the utility of social media platforms in gaining an advantage, stating "every individual can use social media to spread Chinese ideas and development achievements to the outside world and defend China's image" through public opinion battles.[119]

The BRI is a primary framing device around which China operationalizes its discourse-power activities in the digital media realm. For example, in March 2017, Xinhua launched a website with additional languages—English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic—specifically dedicated to promoting BRI-related news, including promoting concepts of Chinese global governance. As with other areas, China has deployed these tactics with a focus on the Global South. An April 2022 article features the headline, "China-Proposed BRI welcomed in Global South" and quotes an opinion article in the *Guardian* stating that the BRI "has brought hundreds of billions of dollars to the developing world in the form of infrastructure, public health and digital connectivity, and been 'avidly welcomed' in 'Global South.'"[120] It also highlighted that "China's global vision [...] challenges the power of the rich countries and the free-market principles of the liberal international order, but it also holds out the promise of solving some of the most intractable and destabilizing problems facing humanity."[121]

The DFRLab has previously reported on some of China's recent digital media efforts.[122] For example, Chinese television company StarTimes, which offers relatively low-cost cable packages to African subscribers, now has more than thirteen million subscribers across the continent.[123] As part of its digital offerings, StarTimes features several channels devoted to promoting Chinese narratives, including those promoting China's image as a "benevolent and responsible world power."[124] In October 2021, it debuted a new program called the "China-Africa Express" to promote Chinese narratives, including those celebrating a shared China-Africa

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114 "《新时代宣传思想工作》第十章 对外宣传工作."

115 For example, the first work cited in this paragraph was funded by the National Social Science Fund in 2020. See: Hua Zhengxue, "中国新型政党制度建构国际话语权的三大战略" ("Three Strategies for China's New Political Party System to Build International Discourse Power"), Gansu Zhengxue 3 (2021).

116 Ibid.

117 "国际话语权之争" ("The Battle for International Discourse"), People's Tribune 29 (2021).

118 "Xi Focus: Showing the Way Forward to Convey China's Stories Globally," Xinhua, January 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/kbcpl.

119 Yu Yan, "中国媒体国际话语权建构探析——以"西方反华媒体炒作新疆棉事件"为例" ("An Analysis of the Construction of Chinese Media's International Discourse Power—Taking 'Western Anti-China Media Hype Xinjiang Cotton Incident' as an Example"), Press Outpost 5 (2022).

120 "China-Proposed BRI Welcomed in 'Global South': the Guardian," Xinhua, April 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/osa3G.

121 Ibid.

122 Thibaut, China's Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.

123 "About Us," StarTimes, https://archive.fo/oFAB2; "StarTimes to Broadcast Program to Boost Sino-Africa Relations," Xinhua, January 29, 2021, https://archive.fo/3Omoa.

124 Eric Olander, "China's StarTimes is Now One of Africa's Most Important Media Companies," China Africa Project, August 27, 2017, https://chinaafricaproject.com/ podcasts/podcast-china-africa-startimes-media-tv-dani-madrid-morales/.

experience as "developing countries" and promoting Chinese concepts of democracy and human rights.[125]

In a document examining China's external propaganda activities released in June 2021, the CPD praised the strides China has made with international media in recent years, stating, "relevant key foreign propaganda media have made great strides to go overseas, deeply implemented localization strategies […] from topic selection to language and style, external reports are closer to overseas audiences, and the originality, speed, view count, and citation rate of news reports have greatly increased."[126]

> **"The rapid development of the internet has accelerated the process of networkization and digitization of the international mainstream media. The internet is reshaping the international public opinion pattern and the international media ecology and has increasingly become an important battlefield for major powers to compete for discourse power."**

In addition to digital media, China has increasingly used social media platforms to engage in discourse-power-related activities. Tactics range from being relatively centralized and overt (for example, in messaging from official diplomatic accounts) to more decentralized and covert (for example, inauthentic amplification of Chinese narratives on Twitter by an army of fake bots).

In one of its more well-known tactics, China has leveraged these platforms to conduct "public opinion battles" under what is known as "wolf warrior diplomacy," a term that has largely come to describe the combative and pugnacious attitude of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, diplomats, and spokespeople in defending China and attacking critics, largely on Twitter.[127] Wolf-warrior diplomacy is thought to be a tactic both in response to top-down bureaucratic pressure to present China as "confidently rising" and

in bottom-up incentives generated by popular nationalists online in China.[128]

In addition to "wolf warriorism," China's tactics on social media include more covert activities, including undertaking information operations on both Western and Chinese platforms and using social media to target and harass potential detractors.

One tactic that state-linked actors employ on social media is aimed at increasing China's international standing by promoting CCP-approved narratives while criticizing Western countries.[129] The narrative content of this messaging is informed by centralized guidance from the CPD. The tactics here involve messaging—pushed by state media and government officials—targeted at a broad international audience in both Chinese and English, which is then amplified by networks of pro-China accounts.

For example, Graphika identified a network of fake accounts on Twitter, which it named "Spamouflage," that engaged in coordinated inauthentic manipulation elevating CCP propaganda. In one case, after articles emerged in mid-January detailing the low efficacy of China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine, the network engaged in a coordinated campaign to republish disinformation that questioned the safety of the US-produced Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. These posts were then amplified "hundreds of times" by Chinese official and diplomatic Twitter accounts.[130]

Chinese actors will also deploy these Twitter networks to address short-term "crises" in response to significant foreign policy events. Such operations include instances of widespread messaging on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook targeting the Hong Kong protests in September 2019, pro-China COVID-19 messaging beginning in February 2020, and the launch of English-language YouTube channels in June 2020.[131]

For example, China engaged in widespread media and social media activity in 2017 following reports in Western media about detentions of Uyghur Muslims in China's western province of Xinjiang.[132] According to a 2019 dataset released by Twitter that tracked almost twenty-three thousand accounts originating in the People's Republic of China from 2014 to August 2017, just seven hundred and sixty-one

125 "上新丨四达时代集团首档中非交流资讯节目'中非直通车'正式起航," ("StarTimes Group's First China-Africa Exchange Information Program 'ChinaAfrica Express' Officially Set Sail"), WeChat, October 11, 2021, https://archive.ph/NOz2j.

126 "《新时代宣传思想工作》第十章 对外宣传工作."

127 Jonathan Sullivan and Weixiang Wang, "China's 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy': The Interaction of Formal Diplomacy and Cyber-Nationalism," Journal of Current Chinese Affairs (2022).

128 Ibid.

129 Ben Nimmo, Ira Hubert, and Yang Cheng, "Spamouflage Breakout: Chinese Spam Network Finally Starts to Gain Some Traction," Graphika, February 2021, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_spamouflage_breakout.pdf.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 "China: Free Xinjiang 'Political Education' Detainees," Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees.

Chinese-language tweets were sent from the China-based accounts identified in the Twitter dataset; this number sky-rocketed to 37,935 in October and 47,041 in November 2017, immediately following increasing international attention on Xinjiang.[133]

Topics related to China's "core issues" often involve more sophisticated and covert tactics.[134] Discourse-power-related online activities touching on Hong Kong, Taiwan independence, and other highly sensitive topics related to China's territorial or political sovereignty likely fall under the purview of the PLA—more specifically, Base 311, the psychological-warfare unit of the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), which oversees China's information-warfare operations.[135] China's Central Military Commission, which Xi Jinping leads, established the PLASSF in December 2015 as part of a broader military restructuring.[136]

While direct attribution is difficult due to the covert nature of Base 311 operations, a number of suspected Chinese-language disinformation operations have been identified by investigative journalists, media, and civil-society groups regarding elections in Taiwan.[137] This included the run-up to Taiwan's 2020 presidential election, during which China sought to sow negative stories about incumbent Tsai Ing-wen in an effort to bolster its preferred candidate.[138] In addition, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael Chase have conducted extensive research on Chinese military technical writings on "cognitive domain operations" (renzhiyu zuozhan, 认知域作战) to show that the PLA is "developing technologies for subliminal messaging, deep fakes, overt propaganda, and public sentiment analysis on Facebook, Twitter, LINE, and other platforms."[139]

Lastly, other covert activities include leveraging social media platforms to target diaspora populations abroad and engage in transnational repression. For example, regarding the dedicated targeting of Chinese diaspora, a DFRLab study in 2021 showed that in the run-up to the Canadian elections, diaspora populations in a largely Chinese-speaking area of Toronto were targeted with disinformation on the Chinese messaging platform WeChat regarding a conservative candidate who was tough on China. The candidate later lost the election.[140]

Similarly, state-linked actors have used WeChat to encourage offline political activities, such as through Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), which are university organizations for Chinese students studying abroad. CSSAs are student-run groups with ties to the Chinese embassy in the countries in which they operate. CSSAs officially help new arrivals with student life, monitor their actions, and occasionally organize pro-China protests and political activities offline.[141]

For example, China's National Day in 2019 occurred during the peak of the Hong Kong protests and saw many activities and organized events. For that National Day, the Manchester, United Kingdom, CSSA encouraged students to participate in a "love letter" and photography contest to display their love for the motherland, and the Imperial CSSA rented out a movie theater to play a state-propaganda movie.[142] In June 2019, the Glasgow CSSA called for its members to form a choir as part of a project to film a patriotic music video.[143] Members of the same choir were also likely present in a National Day protest against the Hong Kong demonstrations two months later, with students chanting slogans such as "one nation one China" and "we are family, we love Hong Kong, we love China."[144] One post on the Glasgow CSSA WeChat account contained tips for how to "be patriotic" and

133 "China," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 19, 2019, https://infoops.aspi.org.au/country/china/.

134 Teddy Ng and Minnie Chan, "Hong Kong Added to Beijing's List of 'Core Interests' amid Post-Occupy Unease," South China Morning Post, January 29, 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1694486/hong-kong- added-beijings-list-core-interests-amid-post-occupy-unease.

135 For more on how China's military uses social media for influence operations, see: Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael S. Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea: The Chinese Military's Use of Social Media for Influence Operations," SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, April 13, 2019.

136 Li Bicheng, Hu Huaping, and Xiong Ya, "Intelligent Agent Model for Online Public Opinion Guidance" ("网络舆情引导智能代理模型"), National Defense Science & Technology 3 (2019).

137 J. Michael Cole and Shelley Shan, "PRC Steps Up Psychological Warfare Targeted at Taiwan," Taipei Times, August 26, 2011, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2011/08/26/2003511686; Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics, Project 2049 Institute, October 14, 2013, https://project2049.net/2013/10/14/the-peoples-liberation-army-general-political-department-political-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/.

138 Joshua Kurlantzick, "How China Is Interfering in Taiwan's Election," Council on Foreign Relations, November 7, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-interfering-taiwans-election.

139 Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea.

140 "China-Linked WeChat Accounts Spread Disinformation in Advance of 2021 Canadian Election," DFRLab, November 4, 2021, https://medium.com/dfrlab/china-linked-wechat-accounts-spread-disinformation-in-advance-of-2021-canadian-election-cb5a8389049.

141 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's Long Arm Reaches into American Campuses," Foreign Policy, March 7, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/07/chinas-long-arm-reaches-into-american-campuses-chinese- students-scholars-association-university-communist-party/.

142 Manchester CSSA, "「学联活动」线上投票 ·"经七十载风雨 颂繁荣华夏"写给祖国的三行情书&摄影大赛" ("(CSSA Activity) Online Voting 'after 70 Years of Wind and Rain, Praise the Prosperity of China' Love Letter & Photography Contest for the Motherland"), WeChat, October 28, 2019, https://archive.ph/DXQ1Y; Imperial CSSA, " 【学联活动】 《我和我的祖国》电影包场庆祝活动" ("(CSSA Activity) 'My People, My Country' Private Movie Celebration Event"), WeChat, October 1, 2019, https://archive.ph/hsvEH.

143 Glasgow CSSA, "招募｜青春，为祖国歌唱"—《我和我的祖国》快闪招募令" ("Recruiting: 'Youth, Singing for Our Motherland'—"Me and My Country" Flash Recruitment"), WeChat, June 25, 2019, https://archive.ph/0BGcS.

144 Glasgow CSSA, "发声｜我在英国，我支持祖国！留学生合唱团正式出道！" ("Vocalize: I Am in the UK, I Support the Motherland! International Students Choir Officially Debuted!"), WeChat, August 18, 2019, https://archive.ph/th2MS.

engage in effective protest to support China's stance on Hong Kong.[145]

In addition to these activities, China uses these platforms to target dissidents. In a 2022 report, Freedom House categorized China as one of the "most prolific perpetrators of transnational repression."[146] Researchers have tracked how China has developed sophisticated social-media-monitoring software to track potential targets, and have outlined the Chinese government's ability to easily access user metadata and content from Chinese social media companies.[147] For example, in August 2019, the Uyghur Human Rights Project obtained screenshots of threatening WeChat messages sent by Chinese security personnel in China to Uyghurs residing in the United States, urging them to come back to the mainland and threatening their family members.[148]

In China's view, it gains the "power to speak" by using these platforms to transmit a consistent and coherent message on China's vision of itself and its role in the world, and by taking the "power to speak" away from potential detractors. It gains the "power to be heard" by infiltrating information ecosystems and trying to create the perception of growing acceptance of Chinese norms and concepts. The StarTimes program on China-Africa cooperation under Chinese governance principles is an example of this tactic.

However, China's leaders understand that there are limitations to digital and social media. In order to truly gain a discourse-power advantage vis-à-vis the West, and to fully benefit from the opportunities brought by the digital age, China's leaders recognize the need to control the future direction of global connectivity by shaping norms of global governance.

Gaining Discourse Power by Promoting "Cyber Sovereignty"

China has sought to embed the CCP-defined norm of "cyber sovereignty" in global digital-governance architecture as a means of achieving this dominance over global connectivity. Far from just an empty phrase, "cyber sovereignty" has implications for activities ranging from how data are stored and used to establishing the critical technical standards that determine which countries stand to gain from the future digital economy.

"Cyber sovereignty" (网络主权), also termed "network sovereignty," holds that state governments should have total control of the Internet traffic within their borders. Cyber sovereignty represents China's vision for a global digital order and derives from its preferred international norms of mutual non-interference and respect for sovereignty, as well as its preference for multilateralism (over multistakeholderism). China's external propaganda narratives depict Beijing's activities in the digital sphere as ultimately aimed at granting countries more power over the development direction of their digital economies, and Beijing has promoted the norm of "cyber sovereignty" in various international organizations, technical standards-setting bodies, and in the commercial relations Chinese firms have with countries interested in Chinese digital infrastructure.

> **"The construction of international discourse power should make efforts in the following two areas at the same time: first, actively participate in existing international organizations with universal influence, improve China's voting rights and decision-making power in them, and strengthen China's ability to guide agendas and decision-making. Second, vigorously take advantage of emerging areas such as cyberspace governance to gain a strategic advantage, create new mechanisms for global affairs governance."**

In actuality, however, China's strategy is less about a true attempt to make the digital world more inclusive and more about supporting the Chinese government's leadership goals. Boosting its economic growth and protecting its ability to exert political control domestically are two major goals of China's promotion of cyber sovereignty. As Adam Segal puts it, "cyber sovereignty represents a pushback against the attempted universalization of [Western] norms [regarding privacy, free speech, access to information, and the role of regulation] that has become the default of the current operating system, as well as a reassertion of the priority of governments over non-state actors."[149]

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145 Glasgow CSSA, "分享｜面对" 音"，海外留学生应如何理性表达爱国声音?" ("Share: In Face of the 'Noise,' How Should Overseas Student Rationally Express Their Patriotic Voice?"), WeChat, November 29, 2019, https://archive.ph/mfsmN.

146 Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer, "Defending Democracy in Exile: Policy Responses to Transnational Repression," Freedom House, June 2022, 27, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Complete_TransnationalRepressionReport2022.

147 Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, "Social Media Surveillance," Freedom House, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media/social-media-surveillance.

148 "Repression Across Borders: The CCP's Illegal Harassment and Coercion of Uyghur Americans," Uyghur Human Rights Project, August 2019, https://uhrp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/UHRP_RepressionAcrossBorders-2-2.pdf.

149 Segal, "China's Vision for Cyber Sovereignty and the Global Governance of Cyberspace."

In other words, "cyber sovereignty" is a normative concept designed to provide an alternative governance framework to that of Western democracies, which emphasize that cyberspace should be free, open, and governed by a bottom-up approach of civil-society, private-sector, and technical-community actors, as well as governments.[150] By gaining discourse power in the digital sphere, the CCP is better positioned to shape the international environment in a way that facilitates the expression of Chinese power.

Indeed, "cyber sovereignty" carries with it specific regulatory and policy implications for the digital domain. Countries included in the BRI, for example, are offered a global governance framework that legitimizes government freedom to control and access data, digital-platform content, and other online elements for whatever purposes they wish.[151] This includes potentially censoring and controlling online media spaces or tracking and limiting citizens expression and organizing in the name of state security.

For example, a 2019 study by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute detailed the deep role Chinese telecommunications company Huawei has played in spreading China's vision of cybersecurity in Belarus, one of the transport gateway countries in the BRI linking China with European Union and Central European countries.[152] In a 2018 report, Freedom House reported that China had conducted such trainings with government officials in at least thirty-five countries on topics related to cyber management and new information technologies.[153]

Also embedded within the norm of "cyber sovereignty" is China's approach to international engagement on digital affairs, which can be characterized as multilateral (i.e., government to government) versus multistakeholder (i.e., including civil-society and nongovernment actors in the engagement process). This is because China views multistakeholder mechanisms as being organized around Western-approved "universal values" rather than organized around government interests, which China views as the core benefit of multilateral organizations.[154] As such, China promotes organizations and platforms that promote high-level state-to-state engagement in the digital-governance domain.

In an October 2021 speech to the Central Party Committee's Political Bureau, Xi emphasized the urgency of "empowering the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries, and continuously strengthening China's digital economy," including "advancing digital industrialization and industrial digitization," in order to drive essential domestic and international economic growth.[155] At the same time, Xi emphasized the role of international digital governance in achieving these goals. He called for China to "actively participate in the negotiation of digital economy issues in international organizations," to engage in "bilateral and multilateral digital governance cooperation," and to promote Chinese "voice" in digital governance concepts—including the norm of cyber sovereignty—on the world stage.[156]

As one Chinese scholar explained, "the construction of international discourse power should make efforts in the following two areas at the same time: first, actively participate in existing international organizations with universal influence, improve China's voting rights and decision-making power in them, and strengthen China's ability to guide agendas and decision-making. Second, vigorously take advantage of emerging areas such as cyberspace governance to gain a strategic advantage, create new mechanisms for global affairs governance."[157]

To achieve these goals, China is an active participant in existing multilateral platforms for digital governance, has promoted and created its own platforms, and has socialized "cyber sovereignty" norms in regional multilateral institutions like FOCAC.

China's Participation in Technical Standards-Setting Organizations

China is actively involved in multilateral standards-setting organizations, which it sees as crucial for advancing its discourse-power agenda in the digital sphere. As Henry Tugendhat and Julia Voo outline, standards-making governance models fall into two categories: first are multistakeholder standards-development organizations, which involve "the convening of governments, private sector, civil society, and intergovernmental organizations" and are favored by countries

150 See, for example: "The Five 'Ideals,'" New America, https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/reports/idealized-internet-vs-internet-realities/the-five-ideals/; "International Strategy for Cyberspace," White House, May 16, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/16/launching-us-international-strategy-cyberspace; "DoD Cyber Strategy [April 15]," US Department of Defense, April 2015, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=764848.

151 Robert Greene and Paul Triolo, "Will China Control the Global Internet Via Its Digital Silk Road?" Carnegie Endowment, May 8, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/08/will-china-control-global-internet-via-its-digital-silk-road-pub-81857.

152 Danielle Cave, et al., "Mapping China's Tech Giants," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 18, 2019, https://www.aspi.org.au/report/mapping-chinas-tech-giants.

153 "Freedom on the Net 2018," Freedom House, October 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2018_Final.pdf.

154 Zhang, "China's Multilateral Diplomacy."

155 "习近平在中共中央政治局第三十四次集体学习时强调 把握数字经济发展趋势和规律 推动我国数字经济健康发展" ("During the 34th Collective Study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping Emphasized to Grasp the Development Trend and Laws of the Digital Economy and Promote the Healthy Development of My Country's Digital Economy"), Xinhua, October 19, 2021, https://archive.ph/Q5YY0.

156 Ibid.

157 Liu Jia and Wen Jichang, "国际传播效能视角下的新时代中国国际话语权提升" ("The Improvement of China's International Discourse Power in the New Era—Based on International Communication Capacity"), Journal of Shandong Academy of Governance 1 (2022).

like the United States; the other are multilateral organizations, such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), in which only official state government representatives are allowed to participate, and in which China has become increasingly active over the past decade.[158]

The CCP has strong links to these standards-setting bodies, as most of its industry representatives are also high-ranking members in the party. For example, Zhang Xiaogang, the former president of the state-owned Ansteel Group Corporation, served as president of ISO from 2015–2017. He was also a member of China's national standardization committee, as well as deputy head of the China Standards 2035 Strategic Project Task Force, and previously served as secretary of the Party Committee for Ansteel.[159] Similar profiles can be seen for Shu Yinbiao, who was elected president of the IEC for January 2020–2023.[160] He also serves as a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and as secretary of the Party Leadership Group and chairman of China Huaneng Group.[161]

These industry leaders give China the power to steer the direction of technology development for the world to follow. In addition to generally preferring multilateral engagements, another core reason that China prefers engaging in multilateral standards-setting organizations is that technologies that are compliant with the standards developed in them are prohibited by the World Trade Organization from being banned from international trade.[162] As Stacie Hoffmann, Dominique Lazanski, and Emily Taylor note, "in essence, this gives an incentive to China to make sure all of their national standards and technology are standardized primarily through these three organizations […] This is an important vehicle for China and its companies to standardize technologies in order to enable and ensure their place in global trade."[163]

Under the multilateral approach inherent in its "cyber sovereignty" framework, China has been active in putting forward alternative Internet technologies in organizations like the ITU that are then marketed by Chinese companies, including

along the BRI. According to a recent Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) analysis, Chinese experts have submitted more than 40 percent of the standards for the ISO group governing fifth-generation technology (5G) regulations.[164] In particular, China has sought to gain support for its model of "decentralized Internet infrastructure," which (despite the name) seeks to grant network operators and infrastructure companies the power of centralized control of the Internet by promoting "digital ledger technologies" that provide operators with the ability to engage in "fine-grained micromanagement and surveillance."[165]

Given that most of China's largest telecommunications operators and infrastructure providers are either state owned (e.g., China Telecom) or subject to the ultimate authority of the government (e.g., Huawei), the result of these activities is "the central micromanagement of services, access controls, and application of policy and regulation at the point of connection"; in other words, the Chinese state gains ultimate control over digital infrastructure and direct access to the data that flow through it.[166]

The implications of this are significant. This large-scale data access not only feeds the development of artificial intelligence (AI) innovations, but also provides potential applications for the state's discourse-power apparatus. In one study commissioned by a State Key Laboratory of Media Convergence and Communication, the authors recommended using artificial intelligence and big-data technology to carry out analysis on foreign audiences, with the goal of developing "personalized and differentiated dissemination" for China's external propaganda messaging.[167] (State Key Laboratories are usually hosted within universities or enterprises within China, and receive guidance from the party-state on conducting research into areas of science and technology deemed essential by government policy planners.)[168]

As the report put it, "big data analysis helps to discover what kind of communication content and form the communication target is interested in; it helps to find more resonant story points, story lines and narrative methods, so as to achieve

158 Henry Tugendhat and Julia Voo, "China's Digital Silk Road in Africa and the Future of Internet Governance," China Africa Research Initiative, August 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5652847de4b033f56d2bdc29/t/61084a3238e7ff4b666b9ffe/1627933235832/WP+50+-+Tugendhat+and+Voo+-+China+Digital+Silk+Road+Africa.pdf.

159 ""晓刚客座教授" ("Zhang Xiaogang: Visiting Professor"), Quality and Standards Academy, March 31, 2021, https://archive.ph/p2Vvq.

160 "Yinbiao Shu," International Electrotechnical Commission, January 1, 2019, https://archive.ph/79q2U.

161 "舒印彪委员：实现'双碳'离不开煤电长效互保机制" ("Member Shu Yinbiao: The Realization of 'Dual Carbon' Is Inseparable from the Long-Term Mutual Guarantee Mechanism of Coal Power"), People's Daily, March 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/7xYUc.

162 Stacie Hoffmann, Dominique Lazanski, and Emily Taylor, "Standardising the Splinternet: How China's Technical Standards Could Fragment the Internet," Journal of Cyber Policy 5, 2 (2020).

163 Ibid, 245.

164 Kristin Shi-Kupfer and Mareike Ohlberg, China's Digital Rise: Challenges for Europe, Mercator Institute for China Studies, April 2019, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/MPOC_No.7_ChinasDigitalRise_web_final_2.pdf.

165 Hoffmann, et al., "Standardising the Splinternet."

166 Ibid.

167 Bao Yuanyuan, "当前国际舆论环境下提升中国国际话语权的路径思考" ("Reflections on the Path to Enhance China's International Discourse Power under the Current International Public Opinion Environment"), International Communication 4 (2021).

168 Emily Weinstein, et al., "China's State Key Laboratories System: A View into China's Innovation System," CSET, June 2022, https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uplooads/CSET-Chinas-State-Key-Laboratory-System.pdf.

accurate matching between communication content and communication target [...] this allows us to carry out targeted dissemination, thereby further winning international support."[169] Recent research shows that the PLA has already begun to develop technologies for deploying these tactics, including those related to public-sentiment analysis and propaganda.[170]

As Xi himself stated in a 2016 speech on the importance of gaining control over the cybersphere, "no matter how large an internet company is, no matter how high its market value is, if it is heavily dependent on foreign countries for its core components, and if the 'major artery' of the supply chain is in the hands of others, it is like building a house on someone else's foundation. No matter how big and beautiful it is, it may not stand up to wind and rain, and it may be so vulnerable that it collapses at the first blow."[171]

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China's Creation of Multilateral Organizations

In addition to participating in technical organizations, China has been active in establishing its own multilateral mechanisms to promote "cyber sovereignty" norms and its vision for global digital governance. For example, China launched the "Global Initiative for Data Security" (全球数据安全倡议, also translated as the "Global Security Initiative"), in September 2020, which puts forth a framework for developing international rules for digital security.[172] Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced the initiative's "core principles" during its official launch. These included "respect the [cyber] sovereignty, jurisdiction, and data management rights of other countries," as well as pursuing cooperation through "multilateralism" (多边主义).[173]

Xi promoted the initiative at a speech at a BRICS Summit in June 2022, stating: "Some countries [...] pursue unilateral dominance at the expense of others' rights and interests [...] It is important that BRICS countries support each other on issues concerning core interests, practice true multilateralism, safeguard justice, fairness and solidarity and reject hegemony [...] Not long ago, I put forward the Global Security Initiative, which advocates a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security [...] China would like to work with BRICS partners to operationalize the GSI and bring more stability and positive energy to the world."[174]

China's most significant effort to spread CCP-approved norms of digital governance is through its World Internet Conference (WIC). The annual event is hosted in Wuzhen, China, by the CAC (as introduced above). The CAC dictates many of the regulations and guidelines that control how China's external propaganda flows through platforms to reach intended audiences. As an illustration of this point, the current director of the CAC, Zhuang Rongwen, also serves as the vice minister of the Propaganda Department.[175]

The WIC is a high-profile event, and often features a keynote address from Xi Jinping. At the 2015 WIC conference, for example, Xi first publicly outlined China's vision of "cyber sovereignty" in global digital governance.[176] WIC hosts high-level Chinese officials and heads of state; executives from

169 Bao Yuanyuan, "当前国际舆论环境下提升中国国际话语权的路径思考" ("Reflections on the Path to Enhance China's International Discourse Power under the Current International Public Opinion Environment"), International Communication 4 (2021).

170 Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea.

171 "习近平在网信工作座谈会上的讲话全文发表" ("The Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech at the Forum on Cybersecurity and Informatization Work"), Xinhua, April 25, 2016, https://archive.ph/hnnFl; Emily de La Bruyère, "A New Type of Geopolitical Power: China's Competitive Strategy for the Digital Revolution," NBR 97 (2022), https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-new-type-of-geopolitical-power-chinas-competitive-strategy-for-the-digital-revolution/#footnote9.

172 Chaeri Park, "Knowledge Base: China's 'Global Data Security Initiative' 全球数据安全倡议," Digichina, March 31, 2022, https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/knowledge-base-chinas-global-data-security-initiative-/; Tugendhat and Voo, "China's Digital Silk Road in Africa and the Future of Internet Governance."

173 Park, "Knowledge Base."

174 BRICS is an informal economic bloc comprising the "emerging economies" of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. "The Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech at the 14th BRICS Summit," CGTN, June 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/1N27D.

175 "Empowering China's Digital Informants," China Media Project, February 7, 2022, https://chinamediaproject.org/2022/02/07/empowering-chinas-digital-informants/.

176 While publicly introduced by Xi in 2015, the concept of "cyber sovereignty" first appeared in 2010, in a State Council Information Office white paper addressing the state of the Chinese Internet: "The Internet in China," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, June 8, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20220711153739/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceus/eng/zt/bps/t944131.htm.

standards-setting organizations including the ITU, ISO, and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN); executives from multinational technology firms including Alibaba, Tencent, Facebook, and Amazon; and academics and thought leaders to discuss issues related to the Internet, all in order to promote China's vision of cyber sovereignty.[177]

WIC attendance by BRI countries, and especially those from the Global South, has grown dramatically in recent years. For example, the last WIC conference was held in September 2021, the theme of which was "Towards a New Era of Digital Civilization—Building a Community with a Shared Future in Cyberspace." According to WIC's website, the 2021 conference included "nearly 2,000 representatives from domestic and foreign governments, international organizations, industry associations, global leading enterprises, universities and research institutes from over 80 countries and regions."[178]

Often, BRI countries will participate in the platform to facilitate partnerships relating to digital-infrastructure projects. For example, seven heads of government participated in the 2015 WIC; all of them were from Central and South Asian countries that had previously shown interest in the fiberoptic network-building projects that China was promoting through the BRI.[179] Similarly, Chinese telecom company Huawei has a "Seeds of the Future" program that trains aspiring global technology professionals from BRI countries in information and communications technology (ICT).[180]

China's Engagement in Regional Organizations

Along with China's active participation in existing technical platforms and the creation of its own mechanisms, a key feature of its discourse-power strategy in the digital domain is socializing its "cyber sovereignty" principles in regional multilateral institutions.

As with its external propaganda more broadly, China uses these regional platforms to deploy narratives that resonate with local audiences. For example, China has put out statements from its meetings with regional organizations like FOCAC, the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC Forum), and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), all of which have emphasized China's anti-imperial solidarity with developing countries and shared history of exploitation.[181] As part of these cooperation efforts, China offers affordable digital products and services to countries that may be naturally distrustful of a Western-centered Internet, in which they view companies like Google and Facebook as able to "colonize" their digital spaces.[182]

For example, in his opening speech at FOCAC's Eighth Ministerial Conference in November 2021, Xi outlined nine priorities for cooperation with African countries through the year 2035, one of which was digital innovation.[183] The range of activities was broad, including establishing joint centers to develop satellite remote-sensing applications, cooperating on technological innovation projects (including on artificial intelligence, new materials, green manufacturing, etc.), and accelerating China-Africa links in digital e-commerce. The digital-innovation programs would be carried out under the auspices the BRI.[184] Following Xi's speech, FOCAC's African counterparts pledged to support Chinese international-governance principles, including "safeguarding multilateralism," "opposing unilateral sanctions," and "opposing intervention in domestic affairs," all core concepts that China has emphasized in its foreign affairs as standing in contrast to the "unilateral, interventionist, and imperialist" approach of the United States and the West.[185]

In FOCAC, China has promoted its governance principles as a means of helping African countries "eliminate the digital divide" as a form of "developing country solidarity." Projects organized through FOCAC include a Digital Silk Road e-commerce project, in which Chinese companies build digital-payments infrastructure from the ground up; this also involves micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises participating in a lecture series sponsored by the Chinese government, "the Silk Road E-Commerce Capacity Building Cloud Lectures," which promotes Chinese global digital-governance principles.[186] As one example of these efforts, Chinese telecom company Huawei is funding, via Chinese government loans, the construction of a $79-million data center in Dakar that will host government data and digital platforms for the African country of Senegal. The project will allow the government to move hosting from servers in the West. At the most recent meeting of FOCAC, Senegalese President Macky Sall

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177 "Xi Jinping Sends Congratulatory Letter to World Internet Conference," CGTN, September 26, 2021, https://archive.ph/MWvpu.

178 Ibid.

179 Heather Timmons, "Mapped: The Heads of State Attending China's 'World Internet Conference,'" Quartz, December 16, 2015, https://qz.com/575180/mapped-the-heads-of-state-attending-chinas-world-internet-conference/.

180 "Seeds for the Future," Huawei, last visited June 20, 2022, https://archive.ph/xJOEu.

181 Thibaut, China's Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.

182 Sally Adee, "The Global Internet Is Disintegrating. What Comes Next?" BBC, May 14, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190514-the-global-internet-is-disintegrating-what-comes-next.

183 "Xi Jinping Attends the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and Delivers a Keynote Speech," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 29, 2021, https://archive.ph/tZNlh.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid. The English phrasing is more accurately translated as "community of common destiny"; however, the official Chinese translation puts it as "shared future."

186 "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals," China Daily, November 27, 2021, https://archive.ph/fmLlt.

praised the move as helping to ensure his country's "digital sovereignty."[187]

China's activities in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have similar goals. Sarah McKune and Shazeda Ahmed describe the SCO as being "crucial to the incubation and strengthening of [China's] cyber sovereignty norm" for Internet governance.[188] The concept of cyber sovereignty is much more institutionalized among SCO countries than in the broader international community. As such, the SCO has begun to function as a disseminator of Chinese governance concepts. For example, SCO member states submitted an International Code of Conduct for Information Security at the United Nations General Assembly in both 2011 and 2015, built on China's principle of cyber sovereignty. China then cited these efforts as legitimating precedents when it submitted its own proposal for an International Cyberspace Cooperation Strategy to the UN Conference on Disarmament in 2017.[189]

China's leadership has long recognized the advantages to be won from gaining control over digital governance, and has engaged in a vigorous internal restructuring and external strategy to gain the discourse power it sees as essential for achieving this. That China's model is enabled through, and dependent upon, information technology means that the ways democratic societies build and manage technology will have a major impact on China's ability to succeed in its goals.

To conclude, China has engaged in a concerted strategy to promote its norm of "cyber sovereignty" at the technical, political, and social levels of international society, engaging in—and, at times, creating—multilateral platforms to do so. China has leveraged regional forums to engage with host countries and provide them attractive opportunities to host a range of much-needed digital infrastructure, all under the auspices of gaining greater control over their digital futures. In its external propaganda messaging, China often targets audiences with narratives that erode the legitimacy of the liberal democratic framework and that resonate with local experience; for example, Chinese messaging on digital sovereignty to countries in the Global South emphasizes a shared historical experience of colonial exploitation or shared status as "developing" countries.

At the same time, however, Chinese leaders work actively in the international technical bodies to implement standards and technologies that ensure the data from this digital infrastructure ultimately end up under Chinese government control.[190] This is because, in actuality, China's strategy is less about a true attempt to make the digital world more inclusive and more about laying the groundwork Beijing sees as necessary for gaining a discourse-power advantage over the West.

This phenomenon highlights the core contradictions in China's governance principles of cyber sovereignty and multilateralism—offering the promise of inclusiveness and control over one's digital future, while executing a strategy designed to centralize power in the hands of the Chinese party-state. The CCP retains the ability to exert ultimate control over user content, physical infrastructure, and governance principles that determine who ultimately gains from digital development.[191]

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187 Segal, "China's Vision for Cyber Sovereignty and the Global Governance of Cyberspace."

188 Sarah McKune and Shazeda Ahmed, "The Contestation and Shaping of Cyber Norms Through China's Internet Sovereignty Agenda," International Journal of Communication 12 (2018), https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/8540/2461.

189 Ibid.

190 "China's Tech-Enhanced Authoritarianism," House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (2019), (Statement of Dr. Samantha Hoffman, fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute).

191 Matthew S. Erie and Thomas Streinz, "The Beijing Effect: China's 'Digital Silk Road' as Transnational Data Governance," New York University Journal of International Law and Politics 1 (2021), 3.

China's Discourse-Power Ecosystem Map

Xi Jinping
CCP General Secretary
President

**Communist Party
Central Committee**

Leading small groups (e.g., United Front, external propagan-

Industry/Firms

*Create networks of pro-CCP/
pro-China influencers; promote China policies abroad*

e.g., **Huawei:** "Seeds of the Future" program trains professionals from BRI countries in ICT

e.g., **StarTimes:** Digital media; programs promote China's image and governance principles

e.g., **Ansteel Group:** former President Zhang Xiaogang president of ISO from 2015–2017; China Standards 2035 Task Force
e.g., China Huaneng Group

e.g., **China Huaneng Group:** Chairman Shu Yinbiao current president of IEC; CPPCC member

Foreign Affairs Commission
Develops diplomatic strategy to
"tell China's story well"

Cyberspace Affairs Commission
Regulations on online propaganda, platforms, data, and standards

Central Propaganda Department
Establishes "ideological direction" of discourse power work. e.g., content directives for state media

Bureau for Press, Publishing, Radio, Film, and TV

Xinhua

People's Daily

Voice of China

CGTN

Central Military Commission

PLA
Oversees "public opinion warfare under informa-tized conditions"

PLA Strategic Support Force
Oversees China's information-warfare operations

Political Work Department
Develops strategies to burnish image of PLA and CCP

United Front Work Dept
Develops external propaganda strategies; develops "network of influencers" to enhance DP

Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan Office

Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.
Oversees CSSAs; works with security forces to monitor Chinese abroad

International Liaison Department
promotes CCP policies to socialist political parties

e.g., CCP & World Political Parties High-level Dialogue
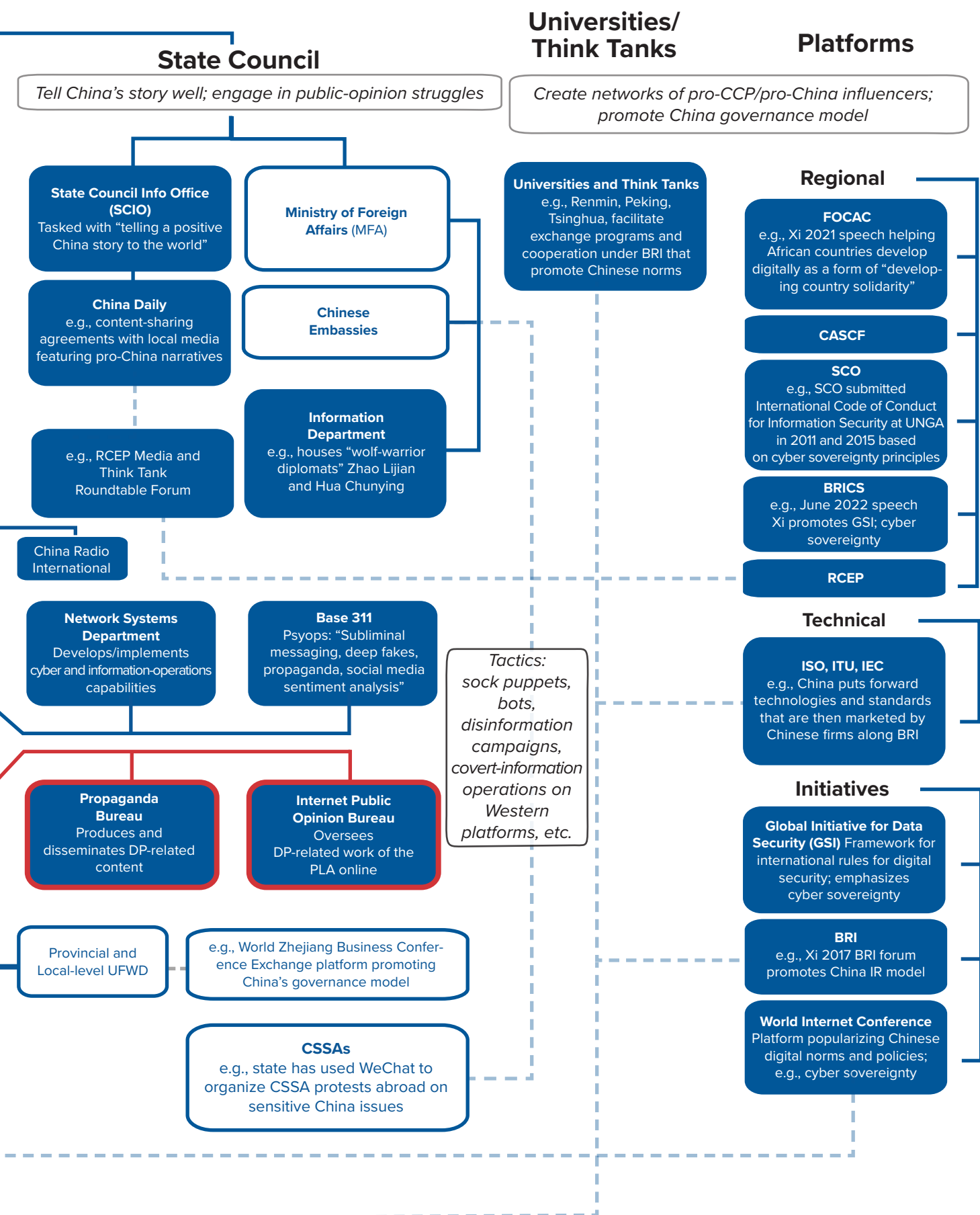e.g., exchanges with political parties "jointly pursuing" the BRI

CPPCC
liaises with non-CCP members to advance party interests

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indicates connections as outlined in report

Power to Speak (Policy articulation, coordination, etc)

Power to Be Heard (Dissemination)

State Council

Tell China's story well; engage in public-opinion struggles

Universities/Think Tanks

Create networks of pro-CCP/pro-China influencers; promote China governance model

Platforms

State Council Info Office (SCIO)
Tasked with "telling a positive China story to the world"

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

Universities and Think Tanks
e.g., Renmin, Peking, Tsinghua, facilitate exchange programs and cooperation under BRI that promote Chinese norms

China Daily
e.g., content-sharing agreements with local media featuring pro-China narratives

Chinese Embassies

e.g., RCEP Media and Think Tank Roundtable Forum

Information Department
e.g., houses "wolf-warrior diplomats" Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying

China Radio International

Regional

FOCAC
e.g., Xi 2021 speech helping African countries develop digitally as a form of "developing country solidarity"

CASCF

SCO
e.g., SCO submitted International Code of Conduct for Information Security at UNGA in 2011 and 2015 based on cyber sovereignty principles

BRICS
e.g., June 2022 speech Xi promotes GSI; cyber sovereignty

RCEP

Network Systems Department
Develops/implements cyber and information-operations capabilities

Base 311
Psyops: "Subliminal messaging, deep fakes, propaganda, social media sentiment analysis"

Tactics: sock puppets, bots, disinformation campaigns, covert-information operations on Western platforms, etc.

Technical

ISO, ITU, IEC
e.g., China puts forward technologies and standards that are then marketed by Chinese firms along BRI

Propaganda Bureau
Produces and disseminates DP-related content

Internet Public Opinion Bureau
Oversees DP-related work of the PLA online

Initiatives

Global Initiative for Data Security (GSI) Framework for international rules for digital security; emphasizes cyber sovereignty

Provincial and Local-level UFWD

e.g., World Zhejiang Business Conference Exchange platform promoting China's governance model

BRI
e.g., Xi 2017 BRI forum promotes China IR model

CSSAs
e.g., state has used WeChat to organize CSSA protests abroad on sensitive China issues

World Internet Conference
Platform popularizing Chinese digital norms and policies; e.g., cyber sovereignty

*Note: This is not designed to be an exhaustive map of China's discourse-power bureaucracy; rather, it is a representative snapshot of the functions, connections, and roles of the bodies outlined in this report.

SUCCESSES AND LIMITATIONS OF CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER

China's ambitions to supplant the current liberal international order present the most viable challenge to the ideological consensus around open societies since the end of the Cold War. China has embarked on an ambitious strategy to gain the discourse power it needs to achieve this task, and this report illustrates the scope, intentions, and purposeful implementation of this integrated strategy.

China's leadership has long recognized the advantages to be won from gaining control over digital governance, and has engaged in a vigorous internal restructuring and external strategy to gain the discourse power it sees as essential for achieving this. That its model is enabled through, and dependent upon, information technology means that the ways democratic societies build and manage technology will have a major impact on China's ability to succeed in its goals.

China has made notable inroads in several areas core to digital governance. China occupies leadership positions in many of the multilateral bodies responsible for developing the standards for interoperability that will power the digital economy of the future. China has also engaged in a wide-ranging external propaganda campaign to enhance the appeal of its vision of global governance, including the digital-governance principles enshrined under the norm of "cyber sovereignty."

Demand for Chinese digital technologies and infrastructure, coupled with the promise of total state control over data resources under the principle of "cyber sovereignty," is a powerful pull factor—particularly for countries in the Global South. Many countries buy Chinese technology because it is affordable and accessible and solves a problem. Even in the case of surveillance technologies, some states seek to address crime or provide better services to their citizens. Western—in particular, US—messaging on the risks of building through Chinese technologies and networks has largely ignored these motivations.

As Sheena Greitens notes in an April 2020 study, the demand factors for Chinese technology are complex, and do not necessarily equate to support for authoritarianism writ large. She writes, "adoption of Chinese surveillance and public security technology is driven by demand factors in recipient countries that 'pull' this technology from China to solve local governance challenges, in ways that may or may not intersect with Beijing's grand strategy or geopolitical priorities."[192]

At the same time, the CCP still faces significant constraints when asserting this agenda-setting power on the world stage. China's multilateral approach is generally slower and more piecemeal in terms of spreading norms; in addition, the concepts undergirding "cyber sovereignty" are vague, meaning China lacks the ability to provide a concrete policy direction even for those countries that find the concept appealing.

Similarly, China's attempts to gain discourse power and convince an international audience of the appeal of its narratives has, in some areas, met with mixed success. One 2021 study funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China found that global favorability ratings of China were mixed, categorizing the US perception as "increasingly negative," the European view as "mixed," those of countries in East and Southeast Asia as "complicated," and those of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America as "relatively objective."[193] The language of the report hardly suggested that China is winning a "decisive victory" in its public opinion battles, and the authors concluded that "European and American countries [still] monopolize international discourse power, and China is still in a position of passivity."[194]

As such, while China has made significant strides in investing in and developing its instruments of discourse power, and in organizing the party-state around these goals, China can still be characterized as existing in a "discourse power deficit" vis-à-vis Western countries and the United States. As of yet, the CCP's current understanding of discourse power is as much aspirational as it is real. China's conception of the parameters of its discourse power are equally shaped by the constraints and limitations it faces when trying to assert this agenda-setting power on the world stage. As such, the world does not need to accept China's dominance in this sphere as inevitable.

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192 Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Dealing with Demand for China's Global Surveillance Exports," Brookings, April 2020, https://
     www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FP_20200428_china_surveillance_greitens_v3.pdf.
193 Xiao and Yang, "新形势下世界'中国观'的变化与加快构建中国国际话语权的战略路径."
194 Zhang, "增强中国国际话语权的思考."

While China has advanced presence and strategy in standard-setting bodies, in normative spaces, in the digital-information ecosystem, and in its provision of physical infrastructure, the Western world's approach has been more piecemeal and reactive in recent years. While recent conversations in Washington have referenced Chinese discourse power ambitions, they tend to treat questions of "disinformation" or Chinese propaganda as distinct from this much broader strategy underpinning China's activities across economic, security, informational, and diplomatic domains.

However, China has identified the digital arena as a battlefield to be conquered and a strategically advantageous space in its quest for discourse power. While China has advanced presence and strategy in standard-setting bodies, in normative spaces, in the digital-information ecosystem, and in its provision of physical infrastructure, the Western world's approach has been more piecemeal and reactive in recent years. It is worth noting here that, while recent conversations in Washington have referenced Chinese discourse-power ambitions, they tend to treat questions of "disinformation" or Chinese propaganda as distinct from this much broader strategy underpinning China's activities across economic, security, informational, and diplomatic domains.[195]

Notably, China is advancing much of this strategy through the very bodies and mechanisms the United States and its allies created to govern and shape a "free, open, secure, and interoperable" digital world. Chinese leaders have taken a bet on Western overconfidence in these systems and built a relatively successful strategy of quietly shaping, repurposing, and encircling the digital world to advance China's discourse power.

That China has placed the idea of a globally connected world at the heart of its drive for global influence, however, should be instructive for Western countries as they craft their own policies and approaches. Whether they acknowledge it or not, the world's democracies find themselves in a fight to shape global norms and the world order itself through the design, use, and governance of the digital ecosystem.

Any effort to counter this reshaping then relies on the democratic world reinvigorating its engagement in these spaces, more clearly defining mutually reinforcing industrial, commercial, and geopolitical strategies, and doubling down on the multistakeholder, collaborative system that China has identified as a threat to its dominance.

195 See for example: "Atrocities in Xinjiang: Where Do We Go from Here?" Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg46165/html/CHRG-117shrg46165.htm; "Disinformation in the Gray Zone: Opportunities, Limitations, and Challenges," House Committee on Armed Services, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg45429/html/CHRG-117hhrg45429.htm; "Innovation Opportunities and Vision for the Science and Technology Enterprise," House Committee on Armed Services, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg44409/html/CHRG-117hhrg44409.htm; "NATO 2030: A Celebration of Origins and an Eye toward the Future," House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg44883/html/CHRG-117hhrg44883.htm; "Operations in Cyberspace and Building Cyber Capabilities Across the Department of Defense," House Committee on Armed Services, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg45604/html/CHRG-117hhrg45604.htm; "Strengthening the U.S. Ties with Southeast Asia," House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg46605/html/CHRG-117hhrg46605.htm; "Technology and Information Warfare: The Competition for Influence and the Department of Defense," House Committee on Armed Services, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg44945/html/CHRG-117hhrg44945.htm; "Techno-Authoritarianism: Platform for Repression in China and Abroad," Congressional Executive Commission on China, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg46147/html/CHRG-117hhrg46147.htm; "The Atrocities Against Uyghurs and Other Minorities in Xinjiang," House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg44450/html/CHRG-117hhrg44450.htm; "U.S.-European Cooperation on China and the Broader Indo-Pacific," House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 117th Cong. (2021), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhrg45169/html/CHRG-117hhrg45169.htm.

About the Author

Kenton Thibaut is the Resident China Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) based in Washington, D.C., where her research focuses on Chinese influence operations.