CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER: AMBITIONS AND REALITY IN THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

by Kenton Thibaut
The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world’s leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

Author
Kenton Thibaut

Editors
Rose Jackson
Iain Robertson

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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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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 deter 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” (话语权力)—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 influence 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 focused on gaining it. Chinese government scholars believe that discourse power comprises two, mutually reinforcing components: the “power to speak,” or to articulate a coherent narrative about an 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 leadership of which Xi Jinping is the head—retains direct oversight over the bodies responsible for carrying out China’s discourse-power goals.

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 a highly centralized platform, by promoting CCP-approved norms for digital governance and Chinese-developed international technical standards, and by offering the physical digital and infrastructural environment 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 gaining 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 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 and 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 disrupting the international order. Chinese officials and academics have argued that the conditions for a new global order are ripe, with the US and its allies created to govern and shape a “free, open, secure, and interoperable” digital world. Chinese leaders have taken a bet on the West’s overconfidence in its systems and have built a 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, multi-stakeholder, collaborative system.


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 furthered 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-a-vis the West.

The next section takes a closer look at how the party-state and regions of the Global South—as areas to 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, multi-stakeholder, 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 discourse power, which 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 to advance 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 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

1. **References**

8. Ibid.
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” (辱华), a period 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 imperialism and was largely designed to curb the infiltration of Western influence that the party believed was largely responsible for the Tiananmen Square crisis. 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.

Connected mostly by new information technology, particularly the Internet, nationalist populists [sometimes referred to as China’s “angry youths,” or fenqing (愤青)] engaged with each other in both online and offline forums of force, and often pressured the government to take more assertive foreign policy positions in defense of China’s interests.13

For example, “angry youths” engaged in widespread protests following unfavorable coverage of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, in which Western media organizations like CNN and the BBC focused heavily on anti-China 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 the need to “humble” China through media coverage, a campaign that was even amplified by the Chinese embassy in the United States at the time.14 In another example, in 2010, “angry youths” organized massive protests in defense of China’s interests, i.e., conforming to the reality of US dominance of the international system.15 In China, the years before 2008 adopted a foreign policy that reflected a broadening of China’s “core interests” in the contest of foreign democracy and the values articled in the People’s Daily in 2001 to two hundred and sixty articles in 2009, and three hundred and twenty-five articles in 2010.16 China in the years before 2008 adopted a foreign policy that reflected a broadening of China’s “core interests” in the contest of foreign democracy and the values articled in the People’s Daily in 2001 to two hundred and sixty articles in 2009, and three hundred and twenty-five articles in 2010.16 China in the years before 2008 adopted a foreign policy that reflected a broadening of China’s “core interests” in the contest of foreign democracy and the values articled in the People’s Daily in 2001 to two hundred and sixty articles in 2009, and three hundred and twenty-five articles in 2010.16

As beginning, 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 illustrates that this trend continued 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 democracy and the values articled in the People’s Daily in 2001 to two hundred and sixty articles in 2009, and three hundred and twenty-five articles in 2010.16

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As Beijing 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 “core” threat to its foreign policy interests. A prevailing view among Chinese academics was that, after the end of the Cold War, the United States had made the expansion of its values the main driver of its foreign policy, and ultimately established an international order on the basis of supposed “universal values”—i.e., norms that emphasize freedom, equality, and justice, but only in the context of Western-style democracy.20

In this context, Chinese scholars argue that Western policymakers promulgated the “China Threat Theory,” or the idea that a rising China and its Chinese nationalist system posed a fundamental threat to the order that the United States had built.21 This anxiety was reflected in Chinese academic writing and foreign policy. A survey of one hundred and twenty three 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 these scholars viewing US ‘pivot to Asia’ as having an anti-China agenda at its core.”22

Chinese fears over the dominance of Western “universal values” were outlined in a leaked 2013 internal CCP document known as “Document No. 9” —or, more formally, “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere” (当前意识形态领域情况的“9号文”)—and anything after the party leaders outlined the threat of universal values to party legitimacy, defining the threat as “the people who espouse universal values believe Western democracy, and human rights are universal entitlements.” This is evident in the distortion of the Party’s own values...”that the West’s values are the prevailing norm for all human civilization...” Given Western nations’ “influence over the world stage,”23 these arguments can be confusing and deceptive.24

Beijing views the current order as inextricably bound up with the Western-style democracy and the values it espouses in the world. 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 leaders saw the urgency of developing a strategy to protect its interests in the face of these growing threats. In this context, China’s foreign policy domain.

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

Some of the earliest Chinese academic writings on “inter- national 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 logic of the Standing Committee of the CCP produces 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 who are less formally involved in decision making. Such a process of consultation occurred (and continues today) with regard to China shaping its discourse-power strategy.

13 Devrie Sched and John Delury, Power and Wealth: China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century (New York: Rondell House, 2016), xi.
17 Jinping has taken charge of all foreign policy-related decision-making bodies in an effort to improve coordination among interest groups.
18 Zhai and Li, “China’s New Foreign Policies,” p. 5
19 During the late 1990s and early 2000s, China’s leadership was ambivalent about the US “pivot to Asia“—but it did not always mean backing of dependent, state-owned enterprises, and provincial governments with varying degrees of power and sometimes overlapping portfolios with competing interests within the party-state. However, China’s discourse hegemony as the “China Threat Theory” to refer to the US “pivot to Asia“ to refer to changes in US–China relations. The “pivot to Asia” is 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.
22 Zhai and Li, “China’s New Foreign Policies,” p. 6
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.” Current Chinese President Xi Jinping himself used the term to describe power discourse 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 struggle” in order to gain the discourse power needed to shape the international order.

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 ideas, 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.”

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 its national power. Rather, it must be viewed as a serious and disciplined strategy to gain global influence, with the ultimate goal of creating a China-centered international order.

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As an example, in May 2022, a public organization super¬vised by China's 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.” In other words, the work of scholars and experts on discourse power is of great importance 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 postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault’s “discourse power theory” as a frame for understanding what China sees as Western dominance of the international system.

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. China recognizes the West’s ability to dominate the production of knowledge through the use of discourse as central to its dominance of the international system.

An example of this, in China’s view, is the United States’ ability to use “universal values” related to democracy and human rights widely accepted norms for state behavior in the inter¬national-system.

In addition to norms, China also sees evidence of the dis¬course 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 sys¬tems and values, including market capitalism and Western¬style participatory democracy. For example, governing principles of Western-created international economic institu¬tions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, often tie funding and support to countries that reforms 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.”

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In 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 promi¬nence 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.” In line with these goals, Xi put forward a num¬ber 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 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 ten¬ure, which marks the “New Era” and China’s transition from “growing rich” to “growing strong.”

Similarly, China’s experience during these periods has been characterized by some academics in terms of the “three afflictions” (三座大山), or the idea that China, over the past hun¬dred years of its history, has faced three major obstacles to its national power. The first was China’s suffering at the hands of foreign aggression during the Qing dynasty (1644—1911), the second was China’s low level of economic development (“中国积贫积弱”问题), and the third was China’s “suffering of criticism” (“中华民族受欺凌的问题”) at the hands of the West—that is, efforts by foreign nations to denigrate and erode the legitimacy of the international order. 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, by which year Xi has stated China will reach its “national rejuvenation”—which includes reach¬ing 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.” In short, national rejuvenation would mark China’s ascension to its

28 Ruan, “中国特色话语的理论创新与构建”, 45-47.
Xi’s tenure also officially marked China’s transition from the more inwardly focused approach of “peaceful development” (和而不同) 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 zhengzhi” (风发政制).10

However, in a departure from previous leaders, Xi expounds greater leadership for China in the international community, aligning with China’s political ideas, political demands, and national interests to global audiences.11 Xi also declared that China must “work to reform the international regulatory system and make known the representation and say of China.”12 Xi has repeatedly emphasized the need to “tell China’s story well” (讲好中国故事) on the international stage, and has proposed an alternative set of measures to those of the currently 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.”13

China further institutionalized and formalized its approach to discourse power at the 19th National Congress in 2017, when 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 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.”14 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 multisided approaches to rule-making, and one that aims to exclude non-state and civil-society actors.15

Similarly, these new foreign policy frameworks, China has begun 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.16

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As highlighted in the examples above, China sees the regions of the Global South as an important vector for gaining discourse power. Zhai Zhigang, one of the most influential political scientists on the subject, 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.”18 This is why China views the Global South as one of its prime arenas in which to act. For China, it sees a common experience of “developing countries” as holding powerful appeal in spreading its governance principles.19

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 itsagnosticism with regard to the domestic political characteristics of the governments with which it engages.20

53 Ibid.
54 毛泽东外交工作思想史研究集 (Study History of Mao Zedong’s Diplomatic Work), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1982).
55 Thibaut, China’s Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
59 “Carrying Forword the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development.”

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Xi said China’s cooperation with the Global South is primarily an “equivalently beneficial trade relationship” (互利共赢) and a “practical approach” (务实) that benefits all parties involved.21

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 greater discourse power. In 2014, Xi launched his signature foreign policy theme of “Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics” (中国特色大国外交), which—along with the foreign policies of previous leaders—takes as its core tenant the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” a long-standing framework for China’s external relations. It includes “mutual respect for territorial integrity and sover- eignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.”22

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

42 Yan Xuetong, “From Hide One’s Capabilities and Bide One’s Time to Becoming Powerful” (从韬光养晦到奋发有为) (Beijing: China’s Discourse Power Operations in the Global South, 2018).
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
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 at the 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 intention to “foster a new model of international relations” under the principles of China’s “five principles of peaceful coexistence.”62 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.”63

Indeed, since coming to power in 2012, Xi has sought to bolster the CPC’s authority over all aspects of the party-state. The 2018 Congress saw the announcement of a major reorganization of the party-state that centers the party at the heart of its discourse-power strategy.64 As of March 2022, one hundred and forty-six countries had signed memoranda of understanding for BRI-affiliated projects.65

Under Xi, China has developed and deployed a number of external initiatives designed to gain the discourse power, or “foster a new model of international relations,” as well as a structural one, providing an institutional arrangement to facilitate China’s external propaganda efforts.66

China’s Internal Reorganization and Its Discourse-Power Goals

The drive to consolidate CCP oversight over the organization, responsible for disseminating China’s international discourse power, is captured by the concept of “top-level design” (顶层设计), a developmental approach that has gained prominence in China’s political life under Xi. Top-level design orientates the entirety of China’s political, economic, security, and social apparatus in a policy hierarchy with the CCP’s Central Committee at the top—such as, in turn, is led by Xi Jinping.67

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 power68 under Xi Jinping, a trend noted at China’s Central School Party Conference in 2018, expressed in a November 2020 interview, top-level design means that, in all of China’s domestic and global activities, the party 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 China’s characteristics.”69

The Central Committee oversees the main bodies of the party-state that ensure party priorities regarding international discourse-power work under the party during Xi Jinping’s tenure. As one of China’s leading Chinese scholars on discourse power wrote, “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.’”70

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 “national narrative” 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.71

March 2018, Xinhua announced that the CPD will oversee a new network, Voice of China, formed by the merger of China Central Television (CCTV) and Xinhua. Its remit includes “strengthening international (discourse power) by telling China’s stories well.”72

The United Front Work Department (UFWD). Similarly, the UFWD is responsible for translating party guidance into propaganda power, and for wielding 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 constellations and disseminating its findings to China’s leadership.73

- Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CAG). To help guide China’s propaganda work in the online sphere, the CAG dictates many of the regulations and policies that China’s external propaganda flows through to platforms that reach its intended audiences. The CAG 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.74

- Foreign Affairs Commission (FAC). The FAC is responsible for coordinating China’s state-to-state diplomacy strategy in a way that aligns with party priorities, including 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, has also served as a diplomat, a role that instead falls to FAC General Office Director Yang Jiechi.75 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 political guidance for China’s discourse-power-related work. The PLA houses the Political Work Force, a “storytelling” entity responsible for disseminating propaganda across 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 to gain discourse-power, must adhere to the policies and overarching strategy from the Central Committee. This represents a marked shift from the pre-Xi Jinping era, in which government decision-making was more decentralized, to one marked by increasing consolidation under the Central Committee.68

To this end, it is less important to China why countries support its vision for the 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 competitive advantage over the West.

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65 China’s leaderships’ 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. “Xi Jinping: Consolidate and Develop the Broadest Patriotic United Front,” Xinhua, May 20, 2015, https://archiveawah.com.
70 Xi Jinping: “Work Together to Build a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”
71 Xi Jinping: “Work Together to Build a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”
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"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 these “foreign influencers” will be the country’s “top sol- diers of propaganda against the enemy.”

In an influential essay on the topic, published in Xinhua in February 2019, China scholar He Jianhua wrote that, in order to overcome the discourse deficit of “the West is strong while China is weak,” China must “find the right entry points” for its narratives and make them the focus of their efforts.46 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.”

For example, China engages in external propaganda messages that seek 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 emerging economies that are wary of Western interventionism, or that emphasize a shared distrust of Western governments, that criticize the liberal model in ways that these “foreign influencers” will be the country’s “top soldiers of propaganda against the enemy.”

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.

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companies, foreign experts and scholars, and representa-
tives from foreign industry, business, academia, and
government. The main goals of the convention include
“comprehensively deepening exchanges and coopera-
tion 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.”

- **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 has non-CCP members to advance party interests. 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” for China. The BRI is a focus of activ-
y for various UFWD organizations, including the CPPCC, as it represents a platform for fostering China’s economic development and a way to “expand united front activities to a global scale.” In 2015, the UFWD instructed lower-level departments to focus on influ-
ence activities that would advance economic coopera-
tion among the BRI and to “create favorable international
environments and are able to promote Chinese concepts local-
ly.” 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.

- **Multilateral and regional organizations.** China often leverages multilateral organizations to win over interna-
tional “influencers” who understand their domestic envi-
ronments and are able to promote Chinese concepts local-
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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.

- **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 con-
cepts of global governance. In 2018, then Secretary of the Party Committee of Peking University Han Ping
urged the university to “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 con-
cepts] through [their] integration.” Renmin University Party Secretary Jin Nuo and Tsinghua University Party Secretary Chen Xu made similar pledges, with Nuo stating that the university would work to “actively serve the coun-
dy’s diplomatic needs, attract more foreign students to China, and help more young people to expand their inter-
national horizons,” and Chen stating Tsinghua would
“encourage teachers and students to play a role in inter-
national scientific research cooperation, think tank con-
struction, academic organization and standard setting” in service of China’s discourse-power goals.

- **Industry associations and commercial actors.** The CPD describes firms as “irreplaceable” in conducting exter-
nal propaganda work and spreading norms of Chinese
governance. 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 frameworks to advance Chinese policies in the norms of the current order, including those related to democracy promotion and human rights.”

- **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 opin-
ion 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 socialistsystem and its role in global governance.

News Agency, China Media Group, and the National Press and Publication Administration. The CCP’s news-
paper, the People’s Daily, was also placed under Xinhua management, partly in an effort to “improve the quality of overseas propaganda.”

**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 pub-
lizizing and promoting Chinese governance norms.” 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 agreement with countries connected to the BRI. China Daily also works alongside national and local-level pro-
paganda departments to organize platforms like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Media & Think Tank Roundtable Forum, which, among others, popularizes Chinese governance concepts to Asian audi-
ences that include officials, ambassadors, media repre-
sentatives, businesspersons, and scholars.”
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.”[103] The digital economy is prompting a reshuffle, and China has the opportunity to gain a first-mover advantage.[104] 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.[105]

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 economy; and the Ministry of Science and Technology’s “Notice on the Publication of the Guidance on National New 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》的通知), State Council of the People’s Republic of China, August 4, 2019, https://archive.ph/QHdZR.

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.[106] Article 2 of the law states that it applies to 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.[107]

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.

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 further to ensure the continued power of the CCP.

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 creating, promoting, 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 vision of the utility and timeliness of this approach is spelt out plainly in an April 2021 guiding policy document released by the CPC on shaping China’s “external public opinion work.”[108] 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.”[109] 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. 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.”[110]

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 cementsd their international discourse dominance. As one scholar bemoaned, “Western countries, relying on the communication systems constructed by news media such as CCTV, 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.”[111]

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In a document examining China’s external propaganda activities released in June 2021, the CPD praised the Chinese government as it had made international media in recent years, stating, “relevant key foreign propaganda media have made great strides to go overseas, deeply im-

print on the world.” From topic selection to language and style, external reports are closer to over-

seas audiences, and the originality, speed, view count, and citation rate of news reports have greatly increased.”

“Chinese language tweets were sent from the China-based accounts, with the Twitter dataset, this number sky-
rocketed to 37,935 in October and 47,041 in November 2017, immediately following international attention on Xinjiang.”

Topics related to China’s “core issues” often involve more sophisticated and covert tactics. “Discourse-power-related online activities targeting Hong Kong, Taiwan independence, and other highly sensitive topics related to China’s territorial or political sovereignty likely fall under the pur-

view of the PLA—more specifically, Base 311, the psy-

tological-warfare unit of the People’s Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLSSF), which oversees China’s information-warfare operations.” China’s Central Military Commission, which Xi Jinping leads, established the PLASSF in December 2015 as part of a broader military restructuring.”

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. 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. In addi-

tion, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael Chase have conducted extensive research on Chinese mili-
tary 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.”

Lastly, other covert activities include leveraging social media platforms to target disinformation in the United States, and engage in transnational repression. For example, regarding the ded-

icated targeting of Chinese diaspora, a DFRLab study in 2021 showed that in the run-up to the Canadian elections, disinformation campaigns in a largely Chinese-speaking area of Toronto were targeted with disinformation on the Chinese messaging platform WeChat regarding a conservative can-
didate who was tough on China. The candidate later lost the election.”

Similarly, state-linked actors have used WeChat to encour-
ge political activities, such as through Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), which are uni-

versity 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 of-

cially help new arrivals with student life, monitor their actions, and occasionally organize pro-China protests and political activities offline.”

For example, China’s National Day in 2019 occurred during the peak of the Hong Kong protests and saw many activ-

ities 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 propagandist film. In June 2019, the Guangzhou CSSA called for its members to form a choir as part of a project to film a patriotic music vid-

eo. Members of the same choir later joined a National Day protest against the Hong Kong demonstra-
tions two months later, with students chanting slogans such as “one nation one China” and “we are family, we love Hong Kong, we love China.” One post on the Guangzhou CSSA WeChat account tilted for tips for “to be patriotic” and

Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions and Reality in the Digital Domain
In addition to these activities, China uses these platforms to promote its global discourse power. According to Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, researchers at Freedom House, China has sought to embed the CCP-defined 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.

"Cyber sovereignty" (网络主权), or "network sovereignty," holds that state governments should have total control over 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. To establish cyber sovereignty, Beijing is actively promoting information technology standards that conform to its vision of digital order and deriving from its preferred international norms.

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. For example, a 2019 study by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute detailed the deep role Chinese telecommunication companies have played in shaping China’s vision of cybersecurity in Belux, one of the transport gateways in the country linking China with European Union and Central Eastern European countries. 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 policy and new information technologies. In other words, "cyber sovereignty" is a normative concept designed to provide an alternative governance framework to that of Western democracies, which emphasize that digital space should be open, free, and governed by a bottom-up approach of civil-society, private-sector, and technical-community actors, as well as governments. By gaining discourse 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.

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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, 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. Similar profiles can be seen for Shu Yinbiao, who was elected president of the IEC for January 2020–2023. He also serves as a member of the Standing Leadership Group and chairman of China Huaxing Group. 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. Håkan Dommeque Lazanski, and Emily Taylor note, “in essence, this gives an incentive to China to make sure all of its national standards and technology are standardized primarily through these three organizations […] This is an important vehicle for China to use in order to influence international standards.”

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

China’s Creation of Multilateral Organizations

In addition to participating in technical organizations, China has already been 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. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced the initiative’s “core principles” during the official launch event, which include the “cyber sovereignty, jurisdiction, and data management rights of other countries,” as well as pursuing cooperation through “multilateralism” (多边主义).

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. [...] 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. [...]”

China’s most significant effort so far to spread C2CP-approved norms of digital governance was at the 2022 World Economic Forum (WEC). 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 internal private data flows extend beyond its national borders. As an illustration of this point, the current director of the CAC, Zhuang Rongwen, also serves as the vice minister of the Propaganda Department.

The WIC is a high-profile event, and often features a key note address from Xi Jinping. At the 2015 WIC conference, for example, Xi first publicly outlined China’s vision of “cyber sovereignty” in digital global governance. WIC hosts high-level Chinese officials and heads of state, executives from...
The concept of cyber sovereignty is one example of these efforts, Chinese telecommunication companies Huawei and ZTE are using a "Seeds of the Future" program that trains aspiring global technology professionals from BRI countries in information and communications technology (ICT). 191

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 sophistication in “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 promote China’s anti-imperial solidarity with developing countries and shared history of exploitation. 192 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. 193

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. 194 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 of the BRI. 195 Following Xi’s speech, FOCAC’s African counterparts pledged to support Chinese international governance principles, including “safeguarding multilateralism,” “opposing unilateral sanctions,” and “opposing interference 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. 196

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-payment infrastructures from the ground up; this also involves small, medium, 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. 197 As one example of the digital-e-commerce 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 praised the move as helping to ensure his country’s “digital sovereignty.” 198

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 inoculation and strengthening of [China’s] cyber sovereignty norm” for Internet governance. 199 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 predecessor statements from its own proposal for an International Cyberspace Cooperation Strategy to the UN Conference on Disarmament in 2017. 200

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. 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.

178 Ibid.
181 Tajudin, China’s Discourse Power Operations in the Global South.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid. The English phrase is more accurately translated as “community of common destiny,” however, the official Chinese translation puts it as “shared future.”
China's Discourse-Power Ecosystem Map

**Xi Jinping**
CCP General Secretary
President

**People's Political Work**

**CGTN**

**China's Discourse-Power Ecosystem Map**

**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 Zheng Xianfang, president of ISO from 2015–2017, China Standards 2035 Task Force; e.g., China Huaxing Group
  - e.g., China Huaxing Group: Chairman Shu Yinbiao, current president of IEC, CPPCC member

**Communist Party Central Committee**
- Leading small groups (e.g., United Front, external propaganda)
  - 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
  - Central Military Commission: PLA
  - PLA Strategic Support Force: Oversees China's information-warfare operations
  - Political Work Department: Develops strategies to brainwash image of PLA and CCP

**State Council**
- Tell China's story well; engage in public-opinion struggles
  - State Council Info Office (SCIO) - Tasked with "telling a positive China story to the world"
  - China Daily: e.g., content-sharing agreements with local media featuring pro-China narratives
  - Information Department: e.g., "wolf-warrior" diplomat Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying
  - RCP Media and Think Tank Roundtable Forum
  - Xinhua
  - People's Daily
  - CCTV
  - China Radio International

**Universities/Think Tanks**
- Create networks of pro-CCP/pro-China influencers; promote China governance model
  - Universities and Think Tanks: e.g., Renmin, Peking, Tsinghua, facilitate cooperation under BRI that promote Chinese norms

**Platforms**
- Tell China's story well; engage in public-opinion struggles
  - Financial magazine: promotes "developing country solidarity"
  - ISAC: e.g., China puts forward digital norms and policies; digital norms and policies; AIP: Latin America

**Indicators**
- Indicates connections as outlined in report
- Power to Speak (Policy articulation, coordination, etc)
- Power to Be Heard (Dissemination)

*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.*
CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER: AMBITIONS AND REALITY IN THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

**SUCCESES 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 name 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—particularly 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, “adaptation 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.”

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 underlying “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 “fortified,” and those of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America as “relatively objective.” 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.”

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.

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.

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 encouraging 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, sorting 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.

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194 Zhang, “没有中国的崛起，就没有世界的稳定”.
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.
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