

China and Geopolitics as Ontology

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Human beings are storytellers; stories form the cultural framework that gives sense to their behaviour and existence. Nations, likewise, “are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from [...] available social, public, and cultural narratives”.¹ Denying a political culture the right to own its story is tantamount to denying that political culture, and the human beings who belong to it, their very right to existence.

TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND UNITY

After its defeat against European powers in the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860), the Manchu government of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) was forced into signing the ‘unequal treaties’ (*bu pingdeng tiaoyue*).² This put both the political leadership of the Manchus and the value and effectiveness of the traditional Confucian political ideology to the question. From this, the aspiration developed to create a Han Chinese nation state that would be built on Western political, social, and economic concepts.³ When the Republic of China (*Zhonghua minguo*)⁴ decided to join World War I in 1917 (in practice, the Chinese participation to World War I consisted of a contingent of some 140,000 laborers – the so-called ‘Chinese Labor Corps’ – who were active in the logistics of the war in Belgium and France), this was partly because of the conviction that this would enable China to position itself as a modern nation state among equals.⁵ However, after the war, the 1919 Versailles Treaty stipulated that the territorial possessions Germany

had acquired through the ‘unequal treaties’ would not be returned to China, but had to be transferred to Japan.

Not only in this period that was later on referred to as the ‘century of national humiliation’ (*bai nian guo chi*)⁶ was China’s territorial integrity put to the question: when, after the civil war between the communists and the nationalists (1945–1949) that ensued after the second World War, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland in 1949, the Western world continued to recognize the government of the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) that prolonged its rule as Republic of China on the island Taiwan and some islands in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea as only legal inheritor of imperial China. This explains why the Taiwan issue is, for the government in Beijing, an ontological question – a question that concerns the country’s very existence as a unified nation state – and why Taiwan is one of the ‘core interests’ for Beijing.⁷

These historical experiences are at the basis of China’s ‘Five principles of peaceful coexistence’ (*Heping gongchu wu xiang yuanze*)⁸ that were first mentioned in 1954: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of other nation states, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal matters of other nation states, equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. These principles have been the guiding principles in China’s geopolitical narrative to this day.⁹

INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL RECOGNITION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE TAIWAN ISSUE

Two phases can be discerned in the process of the creation of a Marxist-Leninist nation state on the Chinese mainland.¹⁰ The first phase is the period from 1949 to 1992. The most important international political aim of this period was the international recognition and survival of the People's Republic of China as nation state. The fact that the Western world, as mentioned above, recognized the government of the Nationalist Guomindang led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) on the island of Taiwan and some islands in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea as legal inheritor of the government of imperial China, and that it was the Nationalist government that represented 'China' within the United Nations, forced Mao Zedong (1893–1976) to forge an alliance with the Soviet Union. On 14 February 1950, the 'Sino-Soviet Agreement for Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Help' (*Zhong-Su youhao tongmeng huzhu tiaoyue*)¹¹ was thus signed. Also the Korean War (1950–1953) had important consequences for China. When the North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung crossed the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, the United Nations interpreted this as an invasion of South Korea. Ratified by a resolution of the United Nations Security Council, President Harry S. Truman ordered troops to force the North Korean army to retreat. On 27 June 1950, he ordered the American Seventh Fleet to neutralize the Taiwan Strait.¹² This order was given in by the fact that, just as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea did not mutually recognize each other's existence, also the two Chinese political entities did not recognize each other's existence. The fear thus existed that when Kim Il-Sung would not be stopped, this might inspire Mao Zedong to likewise bring the strategically located Taiwan under Communist control. After the cease-fire, the United States and Korea signed an 'Agreement for Mutual Security' on 1 October 1953. As a result of the Korean War, the Korean peninsula and especially the Republic of China on Taiwan have become important elements on the Chinese and American geopolitical agenda.

The friendship between China and the Soviet Union was of short duration. Confronted with the disastrous outcome of Mao Zedong's 'Great Leap Forward' (*da yue jin*),¹³ the Soviet Union discontinued the Sino-Soviet Agreement in 1958, and with this also its support to China. 1958 is the beginning of what has been referred to in Chinese history as the 'three years of great famine' (*san nian da jihuang*).¹⁴ This added to the distrust in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that was already instilled in the core of the CCP: in 1927, the 'First United Front' (*di yi ci guogong hezuo*)¹⁵ that had been forged between the CCP and the GMD on instigation of Lenin in 1920 had ended with the purging of CCP members by right-wing KMT members. On 11 July 1961, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea signed a 'Treaty of Friendship for Mutual Help and Co-operation'. This agreement was last renewed in 2021.¹⁶

After the rupture with the Soviet Union, China portrayed itself as the 'third way' of economic and political development. This positioning was mainly directed towards the African and Latin-American countries that were then in their decolonization processes.¹⁷ The same positioning is also visible today in China's geo-economic and geopolitical initiatives such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (*yi dai yi lu changyi*)¹⁸ or the expansion of the number of BRICS (Brasil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries.¹⁹ Also these initiatives are primarily aimed at the countries of the Global South.

The debacle of the Great Leap Forward has, however, also made it possible for more moderate economic voices within the CCP to come to the foreground. This has enabled economic rapprochement to the Western world and has led to it that most European countries have, in the course of the 1970s, exchanged their diplomatic relations with the Republic of China for diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.²⁰ Fundamental for this change was the fact that, as of 25 October 1971, the People's Republic of China replaced the Republic of China as representing 'China' within the United Nations. Especially the votes of the African countries were important in this change. The United States have established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1979.

FROM POLITICS TO GEOPOLITICS

Once the Western world recognized the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's 'revolutionary nationalism' was exchanged for Deng Xiaoping's (1904–1997) 'developmental nationalism': the policies of 'reform and opening up' (*gaige kaifang*)²¹ that were launched in 1978 had to transform China into a strong nation state through economic development. In contradistinction to the Soviet Union where economic liberalization (*perestroika*) and democratization (*glasnost*) went hand in hand, China did not combine economic liberalization with a process of democratization – the so-called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*).²² The focus on economic development and the conviction that a stable international context over a longer period of time are conducive for economic development also explain Deng Xiaoping's motto: "observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide the capabilities and bide the time, never claim leadership, make some contributions" (*lengjing guancha; wen zhu zhenjiao; chenzhe yingfu; taoguang yanghui; shan yu shou zhuo; jue bu dangtou; you suo zuowei*)²³ for China's international policies – a concrete elaboration of the 'Five principles of peaceful co-existence'. It is also in this period, more precisely on 30 September 1981, that Marshal Ye Jianying (1897–1986), the then President of the Standing Committee of the CCP formulated his 'nine points' concerning 'Taiwan's return to the motherland and the realization of peaceful reunification' (*Taiwan huigui zuguo shixian heping tongyi de fangzhen zhengce*).²⁴ These points can be considered as the precursor of the 'One country – two systems' (*yi guo – liang zhi*)²⁵ policy later formulated by Deng Xiaoping.

Deng Xiaoping's 'southern tour' (*nanxun*)²⁶ of 1992 can be regarded the symbolic turning point in China's foreign policy. After China had, among others as a result of the Western sanctions that followed the Tiananmen crisis of 1989, started to no longer regard Africa and Latin America as ideological partners, but also and foremost as economic partners, this 'southern tour' was, on the one hand, an appeal to the overseas Chinese (including Taiwan) to invest in the 'mother country' – an appeal

that was in line with the 'nine points' Marshal Ye Jianying had formulated a decade earlier, and, on the other hand, also a reorientation of economic development: after first primarily China's Eastern and South-eastern coastal regions had been economically developed, the so-called 'go west' (*xi qu*)²⁷ policy gradually shifted the focus to the West of the country. 1992 was also the year of the famous '1992 consensus' (*jiu-er gongshi*):²⁸ the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China agreed that there is 'one China', but they disagreed about what 'China' means. The importance of this 'agreement to disagree' was, e.g., visible on the occasion of the 'The Hague Ruling' of 12 July 2016. When, among others based on the assumption that China's historic rights claims over maritime areas within the 'nine-dash line' (*jiu duan xian*)²⁹ have no lawful effect unless entitled to under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), the arbitral tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines on most of its submissions, both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China rejected the ruling.³⁰

In the first decade of the 21st century, the 'go west' policy further evolved to China's 'periphery policy' (*zhoubian zhengce*).³¹ When the Central Asian countries became independent countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, negotiations between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 1996 have led to the establishment of the 'Shanghai Five'. After adhesion of Uzbekistan in 2001, this organization was renamed 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization' (*Shanghai hezuo zuzhi*).³² This is the first international organization created on Chinese initiative. At first an organization that was primarily focused on demilitarization of frontier areas and countering extremism and drug trafficking, the organization has gradually developed to be an instrument of economic development and, increasingly also, political cooperation. China's regional importance has further enhanced through adhesion to the 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization' of Pakistan and India in 2017, and of Iran in 2023. Since 2008, Sri Lanka, Türkiye, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, Armenia, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have become 'dialogue partners' of the association.



As is evident from the above, it can in general be said that China has always taken a very pragmatic stance for its economic development and has taken opportunities where they occurred. Its economic weight has also created geopolitical possibilities. This assessment is also true for the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative – in the meantime renamed ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ – launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. It can be noted here that when launching the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative in 2013, President Xi Jinping referred to the ‘periphery’ (i.e. Central Asia) and to maritime collaboration with the ASEAN countries.³³ It is only in 2014 that the narrative was expanded to ‘the rest of Asia, Europe, and Africa,’ and in 2015 that ‘all countries’ were referred to.³⁴ More recently, China has launched a new series of initiatives: the ‘Global Development Initiative’ in 2021, the ‘Global Security Initiative’ in 2022, the ‘Global Civilization Initiative’ in 2023, and the recently launched ‘Global Artificial Intelligence Governance Initiative’.³⁵

TO A NEW WORLD ORDER?

The above-mentioned initiatives are often seen as parts of China’s ‘grand strategy’ that would be aimed at establishing a new world order together with the countries of the Global South. Contrary to a conditional collaboration that is proposed by the Western countries, China’s pragmatic attitude – an attitude that I tend to call ‘silent pragmatism’, with this indicating the total absence of any ideological preference in forging relations from the Chinese side – and the economic development of the country that testifies of the efficiency of the ‘Chinese model’ can indeed be attractive for the countries of the Global South.

Economic collaboration with the countries of the Global South may give China the possibility to implement a geopolitical agenda, but this does not necessarily mean that China wants to or is able to create an alternative for the existing ‘international system’ to which it owes its economic rise. All countries with which China collaborates economically (and politically) are each themselves part of the existing international system and collaboration with China does not separate these

countries from this international system. China is itself also an important partner of the existing organizations of ‘global governance’ and emphasizes, e.g., that the ‘Global Development Initiative’ is fully in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Also, the first political success of China in restoring relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of the ‘Global Security Initiative’ does not separate these two countries from the existing international system. The BRI is, in this respect, largely to be seen as a series of local initiatives on which the label ‘BRI’ is pasted retro-actively.³⁶ Moreover, in contradistinction to the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ that is an institutionalized organization the BRICS concept (recently expanded to BRICS + through adhesion of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates³⁷) is more a dialogue platform, and not an institutionalized organization.

What China appears to aim at is establishing an alternative way of doing ‘international politics’ within the existing ‘international system’. For China, the ‘political West’ that is part of this international system has, after the end of the Cold War, developed a monopoly on the international political narrative. The rise of China has given the country the possibility to propose an alternative political narrative. The recognition that discourse and narrative can be used as tools for nations to tell their stories and experiences, to create an international reality, and to make sense of how the world and international politics operate, was clearly acknowledged by Xi Jinping, when he addressed a group study session of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP on 31 May 2021. On this occasion, he stated that China should have “a profound understanding of how important and necessary it is to improve the country’s international communication, and [...] develop a voice in international discourse that matches with China’s comprehensive national strength and international status”. China, so he stated, should “construct China’s own discourse and narrative, interpreting China’s practices by its own theories, [...] using new concepts, domains and expressions to better tell China’s stories and the spiritual strength behind the stories”.³⁸ For China, denying the country this possibility

to bring its own narrative is tantamount with denying the country its 'right to existence'. Both for the 'political West' and for China, political narrative has therefore become synonymous with an 'ontological issue'.

In all this, it is important to keep the following in mind: the vision that the world is divided into a 'good' democratic camp and a 'bad' authoritarian camp is "a misreading of the dynamics of global politics".³⁹ In the importance of maintaining 'one world', a modified narrative, away from the bipolar world story, needs to be crafted urgently.

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Endnotes

- 1 Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." *Theory and Society* 23(5): 605-649, 1994, p.614.
- 2 不平等条约.
- 3 Throughout history, the Han have been the largest ethnic group of China. At present, approximately 92 % of the citizens of the People's Republic of China belong to the Han ethnicity.
- 4 中华民国.
- 5 Xu, Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front. Chinese Workers in the Great War*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, p.9.
- 6 百年国耻. According to Wang, Dong, "The discourse of unequal treaties in modern China." *Pacific Affairs* 76/3: 399-425, 2003, p.402, it was especially after the 1870s that the notion of 'humiliation' entered the writings of Qing Dynasty scholars and diplomatic officials. Furthermore, it was only in 1924 that Sun Yat-sen started to speak of the 'unequal treaties' (Ibid, p. 407).
- 7 It can be remembered here that before 1945, Taiwan had been a Japanese colony for fifty years, starting in 1895 when the Peacy Treaty of Shimonoseki that concluded the First Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895) stipulated that the defeated Chinese Qing empire had to cease Taiwan to Japan.
- 8 和平共处五项原则.
- 9 These five principles were first formulated on 31 December 1953 by then Premier Zhou Enlai during a meeting with a delegation of the Indian government. The Ten Principles for international relations that were accepted in 1955 on the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, comprise the Chinese Five Principles.
- 10 See Avery Goldstein, "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping, Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance." *International Security* 45(1): 168-179, 2020.
- 11 中苏友好同盟互助条约.
- 12 Harry S. Truman, 'June 27, 1950 Statement by the President, Truman on Korea'. Wilson Center. Digital Archive International History Declassified. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116192.pdf?v=31e383a7e226b441e40fb0527a828da0>. (Last consulted on 13 November 2023).
- 13 大跃进.
- 14 三年大饥荒.
- 15 第一次国共合作.
- 16 Because of the rupture between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea signed a similar, separate agreement with the Soviet Union. This agreement was not renewed in 1995. In 2000 it was exchanged for an 'Agreement of Friendship and Good Neighborliness and Collaboration' with Russia.
- 17 This policy was 'materialized' in ideological support for the independence movements and revolutionary groups who opposed different established African and Latin-American regimes. See Bruce D. Larkin, *China and Africa 1949–1970. The Foreign Policy of the People's Republic of China*. Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1971.
- 18 一带一路倡议.
- 19 Note that the acronym 'BRIC' was created by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001. Hij was convinced that the four BRIC economies would dominate the global economy by 2050.
- 20 At present, the Republic of China only has diplomatic relations with Belize, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Guatemala, Haiti, the Holy Sea, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Paraguay, Sint Kitts and Nevis, Sint Lucia, Sint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu.
- 21 改革开放.
- 22 中国特色社会主义.
- 23 冷静观察;稳住阵脚;趁着应付;韬光养晦;善于守拙;决不当头;有所作为.
- 24 台湾回归祖国实现和平统一的仿真政策. These nine points are: (1) negotiation between the Communist Party of China and the Guomindang should be held on a reciprocal basis; (2) direct air and shipping service, mail and trade links should be established; the residents of both sides should be allowed to visit their relatives and travel across the Straits; academic, cultural and sports exchanges should be promoted; (3) after the nation is reunified, Taiwan can enjoy a high degree of autonomy as a special administrative region, and it can retain its armed forces; the central government will not interfere with local affairs in Taiwan; (4) Taiwan's current socio-economic system will remain unchanged, so will its way of life and its economic and cultural relations with foreign countries; there will be no encroachment on the proprietary rights and lawful right of inheritance over private property, houses, land and enterprises, or on foreign investments; (5) people in authority and representative personages of various circles in Taiwan may take up posts of leadership in national political bodies and participate in running the state; (6) when Taiwan's local finance is in difficulty, the central government may subsidize it as is fit for the circumstances; (7) for people of all nationalities and public figures of various circles in Taiwan who wish to come and settle on the mainland, it is guaranteed that proper arrangements will be made for them, that there will be no discrimination against them, and that they will have the freedom of entry and exit; (8) industrialists and businessmen in Taiwan are welcome to invest and engage in various economic undertakings on the mainland, and their legal rights, interests, and profits are guaranteed; (9) the unification of the motherland is the responsibility of all Chinese; people of all nationalities, public figures of all circles, and all mass organizations in Taiwan are welcome to make proposals and suggestions regarding affairs of state through various channels and in various ways.
- 25 一国两制.
- 26 南巡.
- 27 西去.
- 28 九二共识 .



- 29 九段线。On 1 December 1947, the Republic of China for the first time published a map with a U-shaped eleven-dash line. In 1952, under warming ties with North Vietnam, Mao Zedong decided to remove two dashes, however, the Republic of China continued to use the eleven-dash line. In 1984, a new ten-dash line was introduced by the PRC. The added tenth dash is drawn to the East of Taiwan. This ‘ten-dash line’ is internationally contested.
- 30 See South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What’s Next?, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Issue Brief 12 July 2016. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Issue%20Brief_South%20China%20Sea%20Arbitration%20Ruling%20What%20Happened%20and%20What%27s%20Next071216.pdf. (Last consulted on 20 December 2023). Also see Bart Dessein, “The Dialogue of East and West. Joseph Needham Revisited.” In *Maritime and Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea. Faces of Power and Law in the Age of China’s Rise*. Yih-Jye Hwang and Edmund Frettingham (eds.), 45-68. New York: Routledge, 2021.
- 31 周边政策。
- 32 上海合作组织。
- 33 Xi Jinping: China “[s]hould focus on maintaining the peace and stability of its periphery [...]. It should promote win-win and mutual benefits. It should actively participate in regional economic cooperation; accelerate interconnectivity of infrastructure and establish the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route.’” (Xi, Jinping, *Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotanhuishang fabiao zhongyao jianghua* 习近平在周边外交工作座谈会上发表重要讲话 (Xi Jinping delivers an important speech at the Work Forum on Diplomacy to China’s Periphery) http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm. (Last consulted on 17 December 2023; emphasis mine); “China will strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries to make good use of the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund set up by the Chinese government and vigorously develop maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century”. (Xi, Jinping, Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament. http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm. (Last consulted on 17 December 2023).
- 34 Zeng, Jinghan. “Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’.”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55(5): 1162-1176, 2017, p.1164.
- 35 On the ‘Global Development Initiative’: see https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/GDI/wj/202305/P020230511396286957196.pdf. On the ‘Global Security Initiative’: see https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html. On the ‘Global Civilization Initiative’: see http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm. On the ‘Global Artificial Intelligence Governance Initiative’: see https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202310/P020231020384763963543.pdf. (Websites last consulted on 15 November 2023).
- 36 Jasper Roctus, ‘Remolding China’s ‘empty’ Belt and Road Initiative – An opportunity for the EU’, *Egmont Security Policy Briefs* 128, 2020, p.4 posited that China is deliberately presenting the BRI as an ‘empty’ concept, open for all kinds of initiatives. At present, some 3000 projects have started under the BRI banner, with the creation of some 420,000 jobs worldwide.
- 37 Note that, in 2023, also Argentina signed up to the platform but that the newly elected President Javier Milei retreated membership soon after his election in December 2023.
- 38 Xinhua, 2021: Xi Focus: Xi stresses improving China’s international communication capacity http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/01/c_139983105.htm. (Last accessed on 19 December 2023). Also see Shaun Breslin, “The ‘China model’ and the global crisis: from Friedrich List to a Chinese mode of governance?” *International Affairs* 87(6): 1323-1343, 2011, p.1339 who states that, rather than passively sitting back and waiting the western mainstream discourse to become unattractive or invalid, China is “actively promoting a preferred idea of what China is and what it stands for in international relations”.
- 39 Sven Biscop, “War for Ukraine and the Rediscovery of Geopolitics. Must the EU Draw New Battlelines or Keep an Open Door?” *Egmont Paper* 123, p.11.





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