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**China’s strategic narratives and**

**soft power engagements as a means of influence**

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**Preface**

Challenges from rising China to the Western-style liberal democratic world order which has triumphed more than two centuries have become obvious and touch every one of us in one way or another. Only in recent years, after a few decades of endeavour to engage, the red light concerning China’s behaviour and its changed role in the world has started to blink more violently, and the alert situation has been acknowledged and taken into respect by Western governments as well as observers and political theorists. The image of China has severely altered from being a potential partner and equal collaborator in the world affairs respecting other parties into an assertive invader with a clear objective to take over the position of the world leader and to impose its own rules of play. Those rules, however, have turned out to be inappropriate and unacceptable for the democratic nations.

As recently as a couple of decades ago, the attitude of Western powers towards the rising China was mainly positive and inclusive. China was viewed as a growing giant, a huge market opening itself after a grim period of isolation and confrontation that mainly characterized it during the Maoist era, the period of three decades after the victory of communists in the civil war and establishing the new socialist state – The People’s Republic of China (PRC). Even if political reforms did not follow the economic opening up, the leaders of Western powers and China gurus were optimistically of the opinion that it is only a matter of time when China’s wise leaders overcome the uncertainty about the country’s political future and inevitably choose the liberal democratic way of governing and positive and responsible integration with international bodies. The dominating belief that free market economy when employed in China certainly is the precursor of liberal political reforms in this country brought it into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. Some observers today believe that this step was a decisive factor of China’s extraordinary performance in economic growth and trade, taking its GDP markers up nearly 20 times during the period of mere 20 years and lifting hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2011, China gained the position of the World’s second largest economy leaving behind Japan and being surpassed only by the USA.

However, the hopes and expectations of the West did not come true. Although China adopted to and included into the international system, it turned out to be a kind of Trojan Horse rather. With economic growth, no political opening or any changes in policymaking practices in China happened. On the contrary, while performing well in trade and economy and accumulating wealth and experience, authoritarian tendencies in China’s politics have deepened significantly both in the internal government and on the international stage, especially during the soon ten-year leadership of Chairman Xi Jinping as the paramount leader.

In the internal government, many restrictions and control mechanisms for China’s own citizens are widely implemented, such as watching and following people’s private life and everyday activities using high tech equipment for it that gives government both detailed information and effective tools to intervene in any steps. Restrictions of freedom of speech and economic freedom, effective censorship of the internet, social credit system for its citizens etc. have widely been reported as everyday practices. So have oppressive measures in treating non-Chinese people, their language, culture, religious beliefs, and education up to total genocide-like suppression of Tibetans and Uighurs.[[2]](#footnote-2) No need to say that all this is in sharp contradictions with generally accepted human rights principles followed by democratic nations and thus always shadowing political cooperation of the latter with China.

On the international stage, China has become more assertive, skilfully implementing diplomatic and economic means to impose its will on other countries and international organizations and to gain its objectives. Contrary to the hopes and aspirations of Western nations and despite their efforts to open up for China all the gates and routes leading it to fair and mutually beneficial international co-operation, the latter has not grown into a responsible stakeholder in the international system but rather one exporting its authoritarian model and practices worldwide to strengthen its influence and gradually reshape the entire world order.

A decade ago, a China researcher, David Shambaugh, called China a “partial power” and concluded his thorough book on China’s recent growth and impact with the statement: “Although Chinese diplomacy is active, /…/ it is *not influential* in many parts of the world or on major international issues,”[[3]](#footnote-3) adding that China is certainly not about to “rule the world”[[4]](#footnote-4) for both its ambitions and capacity. By today, however, the situation and its reflections have completely changed. That allows the former American military strategist and author of several security policy books H. R. McMaster to argue: “China has become a threat because its leaders are promoting a closed, authoritarian model as an alternative to democratic governance and free-market economics. The Chinese Communist Party is not only strengthening an internal system that stifles human freedom and extends its authoritarian control; it is also exporting that model and leading the development of new rules and a new international order that would make the world less free and less safe.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Today we have but to admit that China is advancing in every sector, robustly using both hard and soft power means to strengthen its influence and thus increasingly rivalling the USA and the whole democratic world. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has launched great strategic programs such as “Made in China 2025”, “Belt and Road Initiative”, and “Military-Civil Fusion” to increase China’s influence and authority over the world. The West is awakening from the dreams on China and rapidly re-estimating its attitudes and re-arranging its strategies. Slowly but firmly, new strategic approaches are forming among Western allies which are based on the understanding of the necessity to build up united resistance measures to restrain ambitions of the rising and extending authoritarian power threatening the liberal democratic world order. Effective counteracts need concord among allies as well as coordinated plans and actions. First of all, understanding and seeing through the adversary’s strategic narratives and its real plans beyond the words and games as well as tactical activities resulting from these should be taken into account as the very basis for further study, elaborating strategic outlines and tactical approaches for coordinated action to react timely and effectively.

This report aims to contribute to this process with presenting a summation of two important complex issues which are crucial for understanding China’s role in today’s world, its attempts and influences. These are, first, China’s strategic narratives or what kind of stories China weaves to show itself in a wishful way to make the world believe in these, and second, China’s soft power engagements or a complex of means for spreading these narratives.

1. **Strategic narratives’ theory in brief**

The concept and term of ‘strategic narrative’ was submitted by Miskimmon, OLoughlin, and Roselle in their 2014 book *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*[[6]](#footnote-6). Recently, the concept has widely been implemented in analysis, for example, of Russian diplomacy[[7]](#footnote-7) and foreign policy, but also in the case of China.[[8]](#footnote-8) Often, the study of strategic narratives has paired with the study of soft power as its enactment. Miskimmon et al. argue in their book that narrative, how it is both formed and projected in a communication environment, helps explain the major dynamics in international affairs. According to the authors, narratives are cohesive frameworks by which we understand the world around us. They shape our connections between seemingly unrelated events and imply causal relationships which bestow meaning upon all parts of the whole.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is when narratives become strategic that they have greater implications for understanding international affairs. Strategic narratives are those used as a tool for communication and persuasion by political actors in order to achieve a certain end. They connect and shape events and identities to give them a sequential and causal meaning.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, strategic narratives do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be created on a whim. Narratives are upheld by mutual understanding, events, identities and relationships, existing systems and structures, and a global historical memory.

In the current international relations system, especially great powers purposely create and use strategic narratives to influence others and shape international order in their favour. By that, a multitude of political actors contribute to the shaping of our conception of order, its purpose and utility. The construction of narratives of order by political actors provides a compelling explanation of how orders emerge and are maintained, as well as their demise. We can conclude that strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas.

Strategic narratives are tightly connected with soft power resources; actually, they work exclusively through the soft power mechanisms. As Roselle et al. state: “Soft power resources – culture, values, or policies, for example – may be attractive because they fit within a preexisting or developing personal narrative. Strategic narrative, then, directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Miskimmon et al. outline three subcategories of strategic narratives the function and ability of which to create understandings and constrain behaviour differ due to their origin and content as well as purpose.

(1) System narratives shape and constrain behaviour within the international order. They are geographically and temporally broad, defining and maintaining the international system through simplistic and binary terms such as authoritarianism and liberalism, openness and isolationism, etc.[[12]](#footnote-12) System narratives have implications for policy formation as well as the relationships between specific actors and the notion of relationships at large.

(2) Identity narratives shape state and nonstate actors’ perceptions of themselves and how they relate to others. An actor’s identity is a social construction consisting of public history, national myths, symbols, language and cultural norms.[[13]](#footnote-13) Identity narratives can shape and restrict actors’ behaviour as identity labels are accompanied by typical characteristics, norms and expectations. Great powers, for example, tend to be actors emphasizing their own sovereignty, global leadership, and responsibility to others. Investing in the great power of the identity narrative therefore leads to acceptance of the expectations that come with it, including greater involvement in alliances and conflicts.[[14]](#footnote-14)

(3) Master narratives are connected with the historical memory of a nation, people, or culture. They are not necessarily consciously formed or taught but passed down through culture to create a cohesive rhetorical vision. Master narratives can be invoked without explaining the story or events behind them – this is what gives them their evergreen power. Perception and analysis of world events are often understood through the prisms of master narratives. They resonate with political myths or are themselves understood as those.

All these types of strategic narratives will be referred below while analysing the particular strategic narratives China is enforcing in its international relations.

On the functional plane, three stages in the working of a strategic narrative are pointed out: narrative formation, projection, and reception.

The formation of a narrative is its initial stage when it is developed and constructed with the purpose to spread it both home and abroad in order to prepare the communication environment where a country’s policies are to be propagated. Strategic narratives have traditionally been a prerogative of political elites, those who set agendas and develop policies. Specifically, the formation of narratives occurs through deliberations among the political elites and through the choice of language to describe and construct a policy program. Often, policies serve to define and embed narratives describing problems that should and can be addressed, and actions that should be taken and can be achieved.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The projection of a narrative is the next stage of the process when a strategic narrative has been transmitted to the public via media, diplomatic channels, different soft power means, etc. Projection can occur through both mediated and non-mediated communication, and it is the most critical level to follow and identify as here the internal mechanisms of it start to work to shape the mind of audience.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The reception of a narrative is the final stage which includes adoption (or rejection) of it by the target nation and the real influence for what it was initially created and distributed. Reception of strategic narratives is concerned with identifying the effects of a narrative on audiences but also with the changes in the discursive environment of the target nations. The latter can be measured via analysis of narrative manifestation in the media and other outlets.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This was a very brief summary of the theoretical background of the strategic narrative theory and method. Let us go now to explore a few China’s dominating strategic narratives that frame its foreign policy making with targeted purpose to gain more influence and special respect in world affairs.

1. **China’s major strategic narratives**
	1. **Introduction**

There exist a number of recent works which analyse China’s policy making from the strategic narratives’ perspective.[[18]](#footnote-18) They mainly focus on two objectives: first, the content and meaning of the narratives Chinese political elite produces and tries to “sell” (formative stage), and second, how they are received by target nations, and which impact they have (reception stage). In-between of these two we have the area, which is of crucial importance in strategic narrative’s paradigm and practical policy – the means and media outlets used for distributing the narratives (projection stage). In this stage, the investigation of the communication mechanisms China’s policymakers use in spreading their narratives should be especially careful, for only in this stage it is possible to discover the actual ways of impact and enact preventive measures to eliminate their possible influence.

Below, China’s five prevalent strategic narratives will be explored that have remained sustainable for decades and continuously play a role in China’s communication with the world and have some influence on the target nations. All of these have several sub-narratives that are changing and flexible depending on shifts in the world affairs and China’s own self-estimation, while the main narratives largely remain the same. These five are: century of humiliation, China’s exceptionalism, socialism with Chinese characteristics, one China principle, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

* 1. **Century of humiliation**

The century of humiliation (百年國恥 *bǎi nián guó chǐ*) is the oldest and most persistent narrative China’s elite is exploiting to convince its own people and all the world in the right of China to take revenge for a century-long suppression of the country by Western powers and restore its righteous place as the world’s superpower or even the centre of the world that it has held for many centuries before the age of modernity. It is a typical master narrative according to the categorization of strategic narratives given above that bases on historical events and, as such, is easy to exploit for its seemingly objective ground. China analyst Alison A. Kaufman calls it “a key element of modern China’s founding narrative.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

In his 100th anniversary speech of the CPC on 1 July 2021, Xi Jinping again pointed that, after the First Opium War in 1839–42, “China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society and suffered greater ravages than ever before. The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to great pain, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness. Since that time, national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Commonly the century of (national) humiliation is quite strictly limited with the period of 110 years in China’s history. It starts with launching the First Opium War in 1839 when Great Britain sent its gunboats to Guangzhou roadstead and bombed the port in response to Qing imperial government’s steps to stop illegal opium trade in the country by the Brits. It ends with the year 1949 when communists led by Mao Zedong triumphed over the republican government after a three-year civil war and declared the People’s Republic of China. During this period, especially in the 19th century, China waged several wars forced on by Western powers and Japan with the aim to open China to foreign trade, obtain concessions for opening businesses there and capture some territories from it. Qing armed forces were defeated several times and the imperial government was forced to step back and meet the invaders’ demands. Especially, the First Sino-Japanese war in 1894–5 was considered an infamous one by the Chinese, for Japan that for centuries had been perceived as a barbaric island nation in the ocean being much inferior compared to the Heavenly Kingdom (the title Imperial China used to label itself; literally: ‘[All] Under the Heaven’, 天下 *tiān xià*) by its civilization, now suddenly caused such a complete defeat to China by grabbing Taiwan and other territories from mighty Qing Empire. This war also was a prelude to the final decline of the Qing Empire and the collapse of the Manchu dynasty few years later.

Historically, however, it was not until the first decade of the republican era when the Chinese started to look at the 19th century as a period of decline and the very term of national humiliation was introduced. Until that, China’s 19th century history was not seen declining at all but rather undergoing very quick development, although involved into turmoil. Indeed, in 19th century Qing records, the processes in China were not estimated as recession or foreign subjugation but the superiority of the Chinese Empire was still taken as granted and accidental defeats from foreign powers were perceived as minor incidents that had always happened and recorded in China’s dynastic histories without decisive results. Modern historians too have found that foreign intervention in China actually touched quite a limited portion of China’s population and territory, mainly big cities and the coastal area. Over 90% of the indigenous population literally did not know anything about the foreign invasion, except semi-mythological rumours about “foreign devils” acting in the ports and big cities. The economic impact from foreign influences on China was rather remarkable, as Keller and Shiue show in their study, concluding: “In sum, we show that Western intervention in the 19th century had a substantial role in creating China’s economy today. Offering the year 1842 as the turning point that explains the Chinese economy we see today pre-dates 1921 (foundation of the Communist Party of China), 1949 (foundation of the People’s Republic of China), and 1978 (beginning of market reforms). The development of China was not simply propelled by its own pre-1800 history, or by post-1978 reforms. The nearly 100 years of semi-colonisation have shaped China’s economy today as one focused on the coastal areas.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

The majority of the Chinese elite willingly co-operated with foreigners with objective to adopt Western views and technologies and learn skills and methods to modernize Chinese society, economy and system of government. In this regard, that time Japan, despite its ambitions and hostile campaigns towards China, was a great example and powerhouse for China where hundreds and thousands of young generation Chinese went to study and brought modern ideas and practices back to China.

The narrative of national humiliation was adopted during and after the end of the World War I when Western powers and particularly Japan took advantage of the newly established Republic of China’s (ROC) turmoil and weakness and forced upon it a series of so-called unequal treaties (**不平等條約** *bù píng děng tiáo yuē*). The latter granted them several privileges to invest, develop and own some strategical branches of economy and infrastructures (e.g., railways) as well as extraterritoriality to their citizens in the concession territories. The intellectual elite of the country raised protest and extended the concept of unequal treaties back to the 19th century, simultaneously raising the slogan of national humiliation. It was quickly adopted into the political vocabulary of China’s political elite and the policies and diplomatic activities of the government of the ROC during the 1920s and 1930s were aimed towards strengthening the status of the nation to win an equal position with the other great powers and, thus, overcome the shadow of national humiliation.

Despite certain success in the 1930s, the period known as the “Nanjing decade”, the “national humiliation” agenda remained topical. Although the separatism of local warlords was mainly overcome, and the central government took control over the majority of the country, China experienced an economic boom as well as diplomatic breakthrough on the international arena, foreign concessions and raising aggression by Japan who occupied Manchuria and established the Manchukuo puppet state there were still in place. All this insulted the national feelings of the Chinese and discredited their government. To end such a humiliating situation was a great task for Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) or Chinese National Party’s government.

Paradoxically, World War II or Second Sino-Japanese War as it is better known in China brought an end to this situation and significantly raised the status of the Republic of China in the international community putting it on the same level with other great powers. At the beginning of the war in 1937, Japan advanced very quickly and occupied vast areas of East and Central China forcing the Chinese government to retreat thousands of kilometres westwards to Chongqing deep inland. When the war escalated from the China-Japan conflict into the Pacific war in 1941, and the USA and Great Britain got involved in it, China’s role as an ally of these great powers increased in importance. China participated in military operations together with Brits and Americans and negotiated as an equal partner. During the war, all foreign concession territories in Chinese coastal cities were abolished and were agreed to be returned to China after war. In 1943 and 1945, the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration accordingly were concluded between the leaders of China, the US and Great Britain where conditions were agreed on how the three great powers act after Japanese surrender. When the UN was formed in 1945, the ROC became one of its five permanent Security Council members. With this, the “Century of Humiliation” narrative could have been closed, but it gained new momentum after communists took the power. Briefly, according to the words of a high communist leader in the early 2000s, “the establishment of new China [i.e. communist China] … put an end to the situation in which old China was split up, the nation was subject to humiliation, and the people experienced untold sufferings.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Today, this narrative has become a key legitimizer for CPC rule, because the latter is portrayed as the only modern Chinese political party that was able to successfully stand up to foreign aggression. The ability of Mao Zedongs’s government to effectively wield diplomatic, economic, and military power are depicted in CPC and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) literature as having started China on its present path to global influence. Chinese propaganda glorifies the exploits of the PLA in fighting off China’s would-be subjugators, including the Japanese, the KMT army, and the United States in Korea, and the PLA teaches its personnel that China’s Communist forces have never lost a war.

Several key moments in the history of the CPC and the PRC are always highlighted as important markers signifying the triumph of New China and overcoming the aftermaths of the century of humiliation:

* Victory of the CPC in the civil war and establishing the PRC in 1949 that almost completed re-unifying the country.
* PLA’s participation in the Korean War in 1950–3 and successful defence of North Korea against the US and South Korean army.
* Displacement of the ROC from the UN and its Security Council and occupation of its place as the sole legitimate representative of China in 1971.
* Establishing relations with the US in 1972 (Shanghai Communiqué) and gaining wide diplomatic recognition in 1970s and 1980s.
* Beginning of the opening-up policy and economic reforms and gaining world’s respect and admiration.
* Getting back Hong Kong and Macau in 1997 and 1999 respectively.
* Adoption into the WTO in 2011.
* Hosting the XXIX Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.

In the last decade, the main narrative of China’s elite is how the Century of National Humiliation has transformed into the Great Rejuvenation of China, which will be dealt with more elaborately below, and how China has gained its righteous position in the international system and is on the way towards world domination.

The only remnant of the National Humiliation is Taiwan as a separate unit, “renegade province” not yet incorporated back into the Chinese motherland.

Today’s critics, however, see the process may also turn around and develop in the opposite direction. Thus, Xi Jinping’s era can easily turn into the beginning of a “new century of humiliation” for China as the US Congressman Ted S. Yoho expects. He elaborates the forecast that Chairman Xi’s authoritarian methods already work against his goal to make China great and respected and honoured by other nations again but, instead, have awoken suspicion and fear. So, he concludes: “Xi’s totalitarianism inside China is severe, and China’s international conduct is drastically out of step with global norms. Eventually, and probably quite soon, the world will refuse to accept it any longer. Xi’s egregious conduct will alienate China from the rest of the world, and the story of China in the 21st century will be one of humiliation.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

* 1. **China’s exceptionalism**

Another great strategic narrative widely propagated and carefully orchestrated by Chinese political leadership is the story of China’s exceptionalism (中國例外主義 *zhōng guó lì wài zhǔ yì*, also 中國特殊論 *zhōng guó tès hū lùn*). Briefly, it consists in the idea of China’s exceptional goodness and superiority comparing to the West and, based on this, its missionary role in world affairs that means – implementing Chinese model to arrange the future world order. As William A. Callahan defines it: “[C]hinese civilization is not uniquely unique but “uniquely superior” – and uniquely threatened…”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Chinese exceptionalism strongly opposes itself to American exceptionalism with arguments of its deep historical roots and essentially peaceful character. Says Callahan: “While American exceptionalism grows out of the idea that United States is the world’s first new nation, Chinese exceptionalism looks to 5,000 years of uniquely continuous civilization to see China as the world’s first ancient civilization.”[[25]](#footnote-25) And further: “While American exceptionalism see the United States as a beacon of freedom and democracy, Chinese exceptionalism see their country as a peaceful and harmonious alternative to Pax Americana.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Having deep historical roots, this narrative has been intensively revitalized and exploited during Xi Jinping’s chairmanship. China’s activities in its international relations’ network widely base on this narrative, and the majority of the content of its soft power engagements is dealing with it. The echoes of China’s exceptionalism narrative in the Western non-political (academic, cultural) circles are comparatively vast and lively and may significantly influence popular attitudes of the people in favour of China, especially in the situation of the current crisis of Western political, economic and social values that makes many to look for alternatives. China is skilfully using the opportunity to offer such an alternative and has had certain success in it.

The historical roots of China’s identification of itself through the concept of exceptionalism based on inherent goodness, harmony, and peacefulness lay in the ancient Confucian worldview. The core teaching of Confucianism proclaims human qualities and values such as benevolence, propriety, righteousness, trustfulness, empathy, and individual cultivation as the way of their realization; in the social dimension, it emphasizes “soft” values as culture, civilization, and social harmony; on the political level – governing by an ethical pattern and avoiding war and violence. Both in the past and today, China’s ideology justifying its expansionism and subjugation of other nations up to the global dominance highlights this Confucian ideal as if it was reality. Actually, as Wang Yuan-kang proves in his revealing book,[[27]](#footnote-27) China has been peaceful and adopted defensive strategies only in the periods when the country was weak and pursued expansive goals, such as territorial acquisition, enemy destruction and total military victory when their country was strong. Despite the dominance of an antimilitarist Confucian culture, warfare was not uncommon in the bulk of Chinese history. Wang stresses that politics of power are crucial to understanding China’s strategies today as well, especially its policy of “peaceful development”, which it has adopted mainly because of its military, economic, and technological weakness in relation to the United States.

The “peaceful development” concept was highlighted as a central one in China’s foreign policy during the chairmanship of the previous leader Hu Jintao (2002–2012) when China was still relatively weak in economic and military terms, at least compared with the United States. Today, more than a decade later, although, the “peaceful development” is continuously stressed and modified into the political slogan of building a “community of shared future for mankind” (人類命運共同體 *rén lèi mìng yùn gong tóng tǐ*, literally ‘community of common destiny for mankind’),[[28]](#footnote-28) China, having significantly improved its economic capacity and strengthened its military power, has become much more assertive and expansive, overtly employing its hard power means to increase its influence. The mentioned proposal of “shared future of humankind” also is overtly explained as “a concept of global governance rooted in Chinese civilization”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The traditional Chinese political doctrine relied on three “pillars” that took shape already in the very early stadium of statehood known as the Shang state (ca 16th to 11th century BCE) and the Zhou state (11th to 3rd century BCE). The first “pillar” was the conception of ‘Heavenly mandate’ (天命 *tián mìng*), according to which the king (later the emperor) possesses sacral power, and his right to rule comes directly from the divine superpower or August Heaven (天*tián*). Shift of power at the sacral level meant that August Heaven withdrew the mandate from one ruler (or dynasty) who misruled and transferred it to the other, the virtuous one. This act was named as ‘withdrawal of mandate’ (革命 *gé mìng*). It is very significant that, in modern times, the same term was chosen to translate the word ‘revolution’ into Chinese, which brilliantly demonstrates the fusion of ancient and modern concepts in contemporary Chinese political thinking. From the concept of ‘Heavenly mandate’, the title of Chinese rulers ‘Son of Heaven’ (天子 *tiān zǐ*) was derived, which clearly expresses the sacral character of the power of ruler. Thus, in the ideal outlook, the power of the Chinese emperor naturally extends to ‘All-Under-Heaven’ (天下 *tiān xià*), that means, all the land “between four oceans” and all the people should be subjects of the Son of Heaven.

Modern Chinese communist nationalism partially bases on the very same ancient understanding of political power, as Jie Feng says: “China’s cultural nationalism falls into two categories – “small cultural nationalism” of each nation and “big cultural nationalism” of “Tianxia”. The former was modeled on the European nationalism based on split-up among cultural nations, while the latter was indeed an inheritance of China’s imperial tradition. The “big cultural nationalism” of “Tianxia” required a monarch as a binding symbol, pointing to the third nationalism – monarchy nationalism which appeared in the form of constitutional monarchy, combining some “Tianxia” traditions and the European idea of constitutionalism.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Very illustrative is the recent statement by Koh King Kee, President of the Centre for New Inclusive Asia and President of ASEAN Research Center for a Community with Shared Future: ““Tianxia in great harmony (天下大同)” is the ideal world pursued by Confucianism in which people live in peace and help each other, akin to the notion of “a community with shared future”. Tianxia is Chinese depiction of the world with no well-defined geographical borders in the ancient days.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

The second “pillar” is the Confucian understanding of superiority of the Chinese culture (文 *wén*). The Chinese perceived themselves as the holders of ancient culture and civilization based on unique script, literary language and cultural heritage that gave them the right and even an obligation to subdue other peoples in order to civilize them. In the long history of consequent Chinese states and empires, it meant, in the terms of “real politics”, assimilation of conquered peoples’ culture, their sinicization, which has continued until the present with the constitutional purpose of forming a united Chinese nation. At the same time, there have been certain periods when China has been ruled by foreign non-Chinese invaders (e.g., Mongols in the 13th–14th centuries and Manchus in the 17th–20th centuries), and then those foreign masters of China were also assimilated and adopted the Chinese language and culture. The roots of the contemporary Chinese national-chauvinist attitude lay in this ancient cultural-chauvinist ground.

The third “pillar” supported the foreign policy of the Chinese empires. It was based on the tributary system that, briefly, meant that China, to some extent, recognized the right for self-government and limited sovereignty of other states but only from the position of its superiority. China saw itself as the Middle Kingdom, the centre of the world, ruled by the Son of Heaven whose sovereignty was supposed to extend over All-Under-Heaven, i.e. the whole world. It is, again, significant, that the ‘Middle Kingdom’ (中國 *zhōng guó*) is part of the official name of the Chinese state even today. Other countries were divided into three groups or circles. Different rules regulating the relations with them were adapted to different countries depending on to which circle each of them belonged. The first, closest circle included the countries recognizing China’s supremacy over them; during the last empires, for example, Korea and partially Vietnam represented this category. The second circle included the countries around Chinese borders who maintained good relations and peaceful co-existence with China and sent regularly tributary missions to the court of the Son of Heaven to prove their loyalty. The third circle theoretically consisted of all other more distant countries who had not (yet) established tributary or direct subordination relations with the Middle Kingdom. Such a system excluded diplomatic relations based on equality. An important concept here is ‘peace’ (平 *píng*) that also means ‘pacification’ the guarantor of which might be only and exclusively the Son of Heaven. Troublesome countries or those who revolted or refused to send tributary missions were to be pacified that often was implemented by military means. At the same time, it also happened from time to time, particularly in the periods of relative weakness of China, that the Son of Heaven himself paid tribute – mainly in huge amounts of silk, tea or silver – to the restless countries for their “good behaviour” to avoid military attacks from their side. This was also considered a kind of pacifying. The ideal (utopian) situation was described as the ‘Great Unity’ (大同 *dà tóng*) when All-Under-Heaven or the whole world would exist peacefully and harmoniously under the rule of the Chinese Son of Heaven, as it is said in the ancient textbook *Li shi chunqiu* (“Springs and Autumns of Master Li”) composed on the eve of first imperial unification of China in the 3rd century BCE: “There is no turmoil greater than the absence of the son of heaven; without the son of heaven, the strong overcame the weak, the many lords over the few, they incessantly use arms to harm each other. From the earliest generations, multiple states were extinguished in all under heaven, but the way of the ruler did not decline; this is because it benefits all under heaven.”

All the features described above, in one form or another, characterize all pre-modern empires, but only in the case of China (to some extent of Russia as well) they are visible and continuously functioning in real policymaking today. Especially, in the recent decade during the government of the so-called fifth-generation leadership with Chairman Xi Jinping at the helm as a paramount leader (最高領導人 *zuì gāo lǐng dǎo rén*), the authoritarian trends in Chinese politics have strengthened and expanded from domestic politics into international relations. More and more frequently and unequivocally, the strategic narrative of Chinese exceptionalism with the hints on the inherently peaceful character of Chinese people and civilization as justification of China’s attempts to dominate in the world appears in the speeches of leaders and official documents of the PRC as well as its soft power engagements.

This may easily be seen in the historical development of the Chinese political system and theories during the post-imperial period since the early 20th century as summarized below.

In the first decade of 20th century, the crisis of the imperial power and governmental system deepened and the idea of a nation state following the Western model started to take shape. Its Chinese version was developed by the founder of the republic, the “Father of Nation” (國父 *guó fù*) Sun Yat-sen (1865–1925), who presented it in the form of the theory of three principles of the people (三民主義 *sān mín zhǔ yì*) and three phases of building democracy. The first three were: people’s rule or nationalism (or rather populism), people’s power or democracy, and people’s welfare. Under the “people”, an integrated “Chinese people” was meant that nominally was formed of the five core peoples of China: the Hans (ethnic Chinese), Manchus, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui Muslims. In reality, of course, the whole project was designed as Han-centric, purposed to the building of a Chinese nation state in the borders of the Qing Empire. That means the survival of the empire in a new political (republican) form was naturally inscribed into this political project. The three phases of building democracy were: military dictatorship, political tutelage (one-party system), and constitutional democracy. In the China ruled by Kuomintang or the Chinese National Party, only the second phase was realized, while full democracy was introduced only in Taiwan in the late 20th century.

In 1949, as a result of the next revolution (“withdrawal of Heavenly Mandate” in ancient terms), republican autocracy was replaced by communist autocracy with Mao Zedong (1893–1976) on the top. Nationalist rhetoric was replaced by the Marxist and communist one. The new Chinese state was named the People’s Republic of China, but the nature of the state deeply rooted in imperial past did not change much. It was very much the same that had happened 30 years earlier in Russia. Execution of the power became even more autocratic with many elements of totalitarianism. In the reform and post-reform period after the 1980s, the nature of the Chinese state remained principally unchanged with dictatorship of the Communist Party as an almighty authority. The Chinese leadership is seeking a synthesis of its primeval autocratic (imperial) political system and controlled capitalist economy. With gaining wealth and power, China has started to export this model worldwide camouflaging it with the narrative of Chinese exceptionalism as the advocate of peace, harmony and multilateralism.

In today’s China, imperial universalism (All-Under-Heaven) and the Confucian ideology of the previous empires, the authoritarian semi-sacral ideal of the ruler (Son of Heaven), and Han-Chinese national chauvinism are symbiotically united. As Jie Feng summarizes it, “[W]ith an integrated cultural core proper to function in modern times, the “Tianxia” Empire resembles a gigantic nation-state and shows a better chance of continuing in modern times.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

* 1. **Socialism with Chinese characteristics**

The narrative of socialism with Chinese characteristics (中國特色社會主義 *zhōng guó tè sè shè huì zhǔ yì*) appeared into the Communist leaders’ discourse in the early 1980s, in the initial stage of the economic reform policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). It was the time when China’s leaders had decided to switch the course of building socialism from the deeply ideologized “leftist” trend of the Mao era that had lead the country into chaos and was already threatening CPC staying in power to more pragmatic economic-build up and improvement of people’s living standards, this way cementing CCP power. It was proclaimed inside and outside China as the policy of opening up and introducing limited market economy elements into the socialist economic system involving private entrepreneurship and foreign investments.

Outside China, the new course became known by Deng Xiaoping’s famous statement (which actually is an old Chinese proverb) “it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice” (不管是黑貓還是白貓，能抓老鼠就是好貓 *bùguǎn shì hēi māo háishì bái māo, néng zhuā lǎoshǔ jiùshì hǎo māo*). Deng’s purpose while uttering it during his tour in Southern China in 1992 was to encourage Chinese people to go along with reforms and avoid doubts whether “capitalist” measures were proper in the socialist system or not, thus emphasizing his pragmatic attitude. Outside China, this plain slogan attracted huge attention and was welcomed as a proof that China, indeed, has turned to the capitalist way, thus laying the foundation to the vital myth that China is really abandoning its socialist-communist way. Even the recent crackdown of the Tian’anmen mass demonstration in June 1989 had not substantially changed wishful thinking of the West concerning China’s economic growth.

The new course in economic policy needed adjustments to communist ideology, and, through the 1980s, an active debate was held among the top leadership of the CCP and professional ideology makers to update the orthodox Marxist-Leninist theory of building socialism and communism to justify the implementation of non-socialist elements into the system. Thus, the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics gradually took shape and was declared the CPC’s official ideology at its 15th national congress in 1997 by Jiang Zemin, the party’s general secretary and China’s leader in 1989–2002. He elaborated three points to develop the primary stage of socialism: 1. To develop a socialist economy with Chinese characteristics meant developing the economy by emancipating and modernizing the forces of production while developing a market economy; 2. Building socialist politics with Chinese characteristics meant “managing state affairs according to the law”, developing socialist democracy under the rule of the party and making the “people the masters of the country”; 3. Building socialist culture with Chinese characteristics meant turning Marxism into the guide to train the people so as to give them “high ideals, moral integrity, a good education, and a strong sense of discipline, and developing a national scientific, and popular socialist culture geared to the needs of modernization, of the world, and of the future”. The party’s constitution was supplemented with those points under the name of “Deng Xiaoping’s theory” which now became an integral part of CPC’s ideology along with Mao Zedong’s thought and Marxism-Leninism.

The main point of the theory is that China is now (i.e., in the 1990s) only in the primary stage of building socialism, and, in this stadium, the most important task is to develop productive forces – industry, agriculture, commerce – to produce enough goods and wealth in order to improve people’s living standards and lift the Chinese population out of poverty. As Deng Xiaoping had programmed already in the early 1980s: “Therefore, the fundamental task for the socialist stage is to develop the productive forces. The superiority of the socialist system is demonstrated, in the final analysis, by faster and greater development of those forces than under the capitalist system. As they develop, the people’s material and cultural life will constantly improve. One of our shortcomings after the founding of the People’s Republic was that we didn’t pay enough attention to developing the productive forces. Socialism means eliminating poverty. Pauperism is not socialism, still less communism…”[[33]](#footnote-33) Deng himself did not hesitate to use here the completely non-communist ancient Confucian concept of “moderate welfare” (小康 *xiǎo kāng*) that should be achieved by the end of this initial stage of socialism. In opinions of different communist leaders, the period to complete this task differed from 20 years to 100 years.

When the current leader Xi Jinping came to the power in 2012, he concretized the purpose and timing and formulated “two centennial goals” or “two centenaries” (两个一百年 *liǎng gè yī bǎi nián*). The first was the centenary of founding of the Communist Party of China in 2021 when a full *xiaokang* (moderate wellbeing) society would have been achieved. The party outlined it in quantitative terms: doubling of the 2010 per capita income figures. In his anniversary speech, Xi Jinping declared the goal fulfilled: “Following the Party's 18th National Congress [in November 2012 when Xi was appointed to the post of CCP’s secretary general – M.L.], socialism with Chinese characteristics entered a new era. In this new era, we have upheld and strengthened the Party's overall leadership, ensured coordinated implementation of the five-sphere integrated plan and the four-pronged comprehensive strategy, upheld and improved the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, modernized China's system and capacity for governance, remained committed to exercising rule-based governance over the Party, and developed a sound system of intraparty regulations. We have overcome a long list of major risks and challenges, fulfilled the first centenary goal, and set out strategic steps for achieving the second centenary goal. All the historic achievements and changes in the cause of the Party and the country have provided the cause of national rejuvenation with more robust institutions, stronger material foundations, and a source of inspiration for taking greater initiative.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

The second centenary is that of founding of the People’s Republic of China in 2049. By that time, China will have become a "strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country."

At least partly, the West, naively believed that, with the new economic policy, the time of Marxism-Leninism in China is over, and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is a mere disguise of China’s new way. It opened the doors of WTO for China, and it was taken as a “normal” market economy country. This is a brilliant example how well this strategic narrative worked, and how differently it has been understood and interpreted in China and outside China.

In their basic formulations, Chinese communist leadership has never hidden that they have no slightest thought to deviate from the Marxist-Leninist way. Introducing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” meant changing the tactics but not the core principles of socialism and cementing the Communist Party’s absolute power. It was represented as Marxism-Leninism adapted to Chinese circumstances and specific time periods, consisting of the Deng Xiaoping Theory (1980s), Three Represents (1990s by Jiang Zemin), Scientific Outlook on Development (2000s by Hu Jintao), and Xi Jinping’s Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for New Era (2010s up to now). The latter was formulated in 14 points at the party’s 19th national congress in 2017 where the leading role of the Communist Party was emphasized in many ways.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Deng Xiaoping himself had stated four cardinal points in 1979: 1. The principle of upholding the socialist path; 2. The principle of upholding the people’s democratic dictatorship; 3. The principle of upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party; 4. The principle of upholding Mao Zedong’s Thought and Marxism-Leninism.

Xi Jinping in his speech held in CPC Central Committee plenum in January 2013, shortly after he was elected Secretary General of CPC, stated in very resolute wording: “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is socialism. It is not any other sort of “ism.” The foundational, scientific principles of socialism cannot be abandoned; only if they are abandoned would our system no longer be socialist. From first to the last our Party has emphasized that “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” adheres to the basic principles of scientific socialism and is imbued with characteristically Chinese features bestowed by the conditions of the times. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism, not any other “ism”.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

* 1. **One China principle**

One China principle (一個中國原則 *yī gè zhōng guó yuán zé*) or – in practical use – One China policy (一個中國政策 *yī gè zhōng guó zhèng cè*) is another great narrative the PRC has successfully exploited for several decades in order to make the world recognize its legitimacy as the only Chinese state and oust Taiwan, which it claims (without any legal justification from the standpoint of international law)[[37]](#footnote-37) to be its inalienable territory, from international policy and diplomacy. By today, the majority of world nations have agreed with this policy and, thus, for the sake of economic advantage, following the PRC’s demands, are thoroughly influenced by the latter. Therefore, we may conclude that this is the most successful narrative adopted and put into real policy by rest of the world. This is the reason why it will be elaborated here in a more detailed way compared with other sections in order to open its historical background.

The One China principle has deep historical roots that go back to the post World War II situation and rivalry between the Republic of China (ROC) and People’s Republic of China (PRC). With strengthening and gaining power and authority on the international stage, the PRC has become more assertive to impose its rules to other nations and international bodies including One China policy. At the same time, Taiwan, although marginalized in official political and diplomatic relations, is acting through a vivid and functional network of unofficial relations and has unanimous silent support from the world democracies. Recently, however, Beijing has escalated military threats towards the island, thus increasing the potentiality of a real conflict that makes it possible that the rationality of One China policy followed by third countries may be revised in the future.

*The Taiwan issue: historical overview*

Actually, Taiwan that the PRC now regards “an inalienable part of China” has relatively short history of political connections with China. Until the 17th century, the island’s contacts with the mainland were limited to a little number of settlers transferred there from southern Fujian and partly mixed with aboriginals of Malayo-Polynesian descent. Interestingly enough, the first foreigners who tried to establish a standing administration in Taiwan were not the Chinese but Europeans. The Portuguese reached the “Beautiful Island” or *Ilha Formosa*, as they named it, around 1590, but soon the Dutch took the initiative.

In the 1620s, the Dutch East India Company established the Zeelandia fort and administrative centre in Southern Taiwan, near today’s Tainan city, and started to colonize the island that became an important trade and transit centre between their Batavian (Java) colony, China, and Japan. In 1662, the Dutch were expelled by the famous Chinese military leader Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) who was loyal to the fallen Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and hoped to use Taiwan as a base for fighting against the Manchu invaders who had established the Qing dynasty in Beijing in 1644. Koxinga’s descendants ruled the island about 20 years and surrendered to Qing powers only in the 1680s.

Qing ruled Taiwan as a prefecture of Fujian province for 200 years and turned the island into a province of the empire only in 1887. Up to that time, the Qing administration actually had control over merely 45% of its territory, while the rest of island remained a poorly administered domain of the aboriginals. During the Qing rule massive immigration from mainland, especially from Southern Fujian and Guangdong took place, and gradually the Southern Fujianese or Minnan people (also called Hoklo or Hokkien) became the majority ethnic group sharing the island with another migrant group, the Hakka (Gejia) people, and local aboriginals who were largely assimilated by incomers.[[38]](#footnote-38) Several uprisings took place in Taiwan against the Qing administration during the 18–19th centuries. No wonder that Manchu officials claimed that Taiwan was an unstable place, subject to “a putsch every three years, and a general uprising every five years”.

In 1895, as a consequence of the first Sino-Japanese war, the sovereignty over Taiwan was given to Japan according to the *Shimonoseki Peace Treaty* wherewith China abandoned its authority over the island *in perpetuity*, i.e., forever.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In the same year 1895, during the power vacuum, an important political interlude happened in Taiwan: a declaration of the Republic of Taiwan in Taipei on 25 May by a group of Qing officials and local nobility. The republic lasted little more than four months offering some military resistance to the Japanese until the latter captured the whole island in October and put the short-lived republic to the end executing thousands of its troops and supporters. The Republic of Taiwan, by the way, was the first attempt to establish a republican state in Asia.

Taiwan remained under the Japanese imperial government for half a century. The Japanese, whose long-term aim was to turn Taiwan into an integral part of their empire, did a lot to build up the effective economy and infrastructure as well as educational system in the island following the Japanese model. In the early decades of the 20th century, there was quite severe resistance against the Japanese rule in some places, which culminated with the Miaoli incident in 1913 and the Taipani incident in 1915, both of which cost thousands of Taiwanese lives. Minor unrest continued until early 1930s, especially among aboriginals who did not endure the Japanese administration’s harsh methods to force them change their traditional lifestyle in favour of Japanese-style civilization. In 1920s-30s the resistance mainly turned, however, into political fighting with the demand for more rights for the Taiwanese in domestic affairs, and thus a consciousness of Taiwanese identity started to emerge, mainly among the Hoklo-Taiwanese who considered themselves Taiwanese as a separate nation different from the Chinese on the mainland, as Gary Davison sums up: “Cut off from the mainland, the people of Taiwan searched in literary, artistic, and other cultural realms for an authentic identity that necessarily had to be defined in a colonial context controlled by the Japanese. Significantly, those at the forefront of the search for identity gave little evidence of longing for reunion with mainland China. Most typically, they sought self-rule and cultural integrity for Taiwan within the broader context of Japanese imperial rule.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

When Japan surrendered in World War Two, it was forced to abandon all occupied territories including Taiwan with Pescador (Penghu) islands. In October 1945, troops of the Kuomintang (KMT) China landed in the island to take over the control over it. The occupation of Taiwan by the ROC was based on the document known as the *Cairo Declaration*, actually an unsigned press release dated 1 December 1943, a few days after the meeting of Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek in the capital of Egypt where the strategic plan for defeating Japan as well as the post-war policy in the Asia-Pacific region were discussed. Taiwan (Formosa) was mentioned there as the future subject of the ROC: “It is their [i.e., three great powers: the US, Great Britain, and China – M.L.] purpose that Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the First World War in 1914, and that all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The *Cairo Declaration* was supported by the *Potsdam Declaration* issued by Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek on 26 July 1945 that confirmed ROC’s authority over Taiwan after Japan’s surrender. In the *San Francisco Peace Treaty*, or *Treaty of Peace with Japan*, that officially ended World War II and resolved Japan’s position as an imperial Asian power, however, the status of was Taiwan left undefined. It was only said: “Japan renounces all right, title and claim to Formosa and the Pescadores.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

The *Treaty* was signed on 28 September 1951 by 48 nations and entered into force on 28 April 1952. By that time, Taiwan had been occupied by the ROC for seven years already, and since 1949, after KMT’s defeat in the Chinese civil war, it actually was the only territory under the control of the government of the ROC. The situation was by default recognized by the U.S.A. and other allies, and nobody was interested to dispute it since Taiwan under the ROC had become an important stronghold against communist China, while the latter already demonstrated its aggressive claims, including in the Korean War on the side of the communist North.

Because of a lack of consensus among the nations participating the San Francisco conference concerning the legitimacy of China’s two governments – the ROC in Taipei and the PRC in Beijing – neither of them was invited, and so signature of a Chinese representative is absent on the *Treaty*. The ROC concluded a separate treaty, known as the *Taipei Peace Treaty*, with Japan next year that in wording followed the *San Francisco Treaty*. Interestingly enough, the status of Taiwan as a part of China was not specified in this treaty either.

The Taiwanese soon found that the uninvited Chinese rule was much crueller and more corrupted than the Japanese. After the 28 February 1947 incident in Taipei where KMT soldiers beat a Taiwanese tobacco peddler, who was then arrested, local protest quickly grew into nationwide resistance. Instead of negotiating, Chiang Kai-shek’s government sent troops to subdue the uprising, and during the following months so-called white terror was launched murdering tens of thousands native Taiwanese. The local political, business, and intellectual elite accused in collaboration with Japanese was killed and massively arrested in order to annihilate actual and potential leaders of resistance and avoid emerging any pro-Taiwanese sentiment in the future. By their style and purpose, KMT repressions in Taiwan resembled very much these of the Soviet Union in occupied Baltic countries in the 1940s.

After the Nationalist government was forced to flee to Taiwan in 1949 together with nearly two million mainlanders, mainly KMT officials and military and their family members, a state of war was declared in the island as emergency against the threat of communists’ invasion from the mainland that lasted until 1987. A dictatorship of KMT was established with no alternative political movements allowed. Legislative and government structure was frozen, and no general elections were conducted until 1991.

Thus, Nationalist China’s position on Taiwan after World War II was unambiguous: Taiwan is a part of China and its people merely the population of Taiwan province, certainly not a definite nation. It was based on its interpretation of documents and agreements adopted in the war and post-war conditions according to which after surrender Japan had to abandon all the seized territories including Taiwan, and the restoration of China’s authority over the latter had to be implied warranty. No matter that at the time of founding the ROC in 1912 after the collapse of the Qing dynasty Taiwan was part of Japan as granted by an internationally recognized agreement (*Shimonoseki Peace Treaty*) that was never disputed by any government of the ROC. After World War Two, however, the ROC, using situation, changed its position that was by default adopted by the Allies, and the question of possible independence of Taiwan was not even discussed.

The situation turned more complicated after 1949. *De iure*, the ROC continued to exist as the legitimate state formally representing whole China, since only few countries speeded to establish official relationships with the new communist government of the PRC in Beijing. The ROC also maintained its seats in international bodies, including the UN, and the permanent membership in its Security Council until 1971. *De facto*, however, the ROC had control only over Taiwan and a few small islands in Taiwan Strait, while the communists ruled the rest of China. Of course, the latter immediately started to claim for sovereignty over Taiwan too as it was already consented by international community as a part of China.

Chiang Kai-shek took his government’s retreat to Taiwan as temporary, hoping sooner or later to launch an offensive and by military means restore KMT power over whole China. Until his death in 1975, he never seriously considered the possibility that Taiwan might be turned into a political unit separate from China, an independent state, a subject of international law. Such obstinacy became fatal for the ROC as a recognized counterpart of the PRC in the international politics later, in the 1970s, when it lost its seat in the UN and, gradually, most of its diplomatic allies who, one by one, switched to favour the PRC, recognizing it as representing China at the international level.

Both sides, the ROC under KMT and the PRC under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), thus, held their own concept of “One China” regarding Taiwan with the identical content – “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China” – but from the standpoint of different legitimacy as both considered themselves the only legitimate power to rule China. “There is no two suns in the heaven,” said Chiang Kai-shek while offered negotiations over sharing the membership in the UN with the PRC, which, at that time (the early 1970s), could most likely have resulted in recognition of Taiwan’s independence by the international community. The aging generalissimo, however, did not agree with such a scenario and unwillingly lost everything, giving chances to another aging dictator most hated by him – Mao Zedong – who thus initiated the PRC’s triumph on the international arena.

So, we may see that, starting with the above-mentioned historical UN GA session, the “One China” theory turned into a fixed direction that rose into the highlight of international policy, as, with years, the Beijing communist government strengthened its claim for instituting PRC’s sovereignty over Taiwan, while ROC’s “One China” position gradually lost its topicality.

However, as *The Liberty Times* editorial of 2November 2021, on the occasion of 50th anniversary of the event, states: “From the perspective of international law, Resolution 2758 is a consensus resolution and is not legally binding. Its interpretation and implementation depends on the foreign policy of each country, and the opinion of each country’s government and citizens. China has fabricated a legal basis for the resolution, extended its interpretation and application, and “smuggled it” into the UN framework, specialized agencies and secretariats, demanding that any matter involving Taiwan must adhere to the “one China” principle.“[[43]](#footnote-43)

*“One China” as the political principle of the PRC*

In the preamble of the *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China* in its revised edition of 1982, we find the passage: “Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China. It is the lofty duty of the entire Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Thus, the issue of Taiwan and “reunifying the motherland” is elevated to the constitutional level. It is interesting to note that no other geographical name appears in the whole text of the Constitution except in the very last, 138th paragraph that states: “The capital of the People's Republic of China is Beijing.” The Constitution does not define the “sacred territory” of the PRC in geographical terms; the sole hint is on Taiwan.

In the *Principles Governing the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Other Countries*, the “One China” doctrine is formulated as a decree for all diplomatic allies of the PRC: “There is only one China in the world. Taiwan Province is an integral part of the territory of the PRC. Any country seeking to establish diplomatic relations with China must show its readiness to sever all diplomatic relations with the Taiwan authorities and recognize the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China. The Chinese government will never tolerate any country scheming to create "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan"; nor will it tolerate any moves on the part of countries having formal diplomatic relations with China to establish any form of official relations with the Taiwan authorities.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Today the PRC has diplomatic relations with 178 countries. All those have formally adopted the “One China” demand and ceased official contacts with the ROC in Taiwan. The latter has only 14 diplomatic allies left; most of them (except the Holy See) are small or tiny nations of Latin America, Oceania, and Africa that serve as a lobby group for Taiwan in the UN. No need to mention that these countries do not enjoy diplomatic relations with the PRC.

Beijing, after getting the mandate from the UN as the sole legal representative of China in international politics, has made the “One China” issue mandatory for governments and achieved keeping Taiwan in diplomatic isolation – an unprecedented case in modern diplomatic history that a nation of 23 million with full control over its territory and resources, developed democracy, vibrant economy, and strong defence forces is virtually left outside the international community merely because one of its members demands it. In today’s world, Taiwan, a peace-loving state embracing democracy, freedom, human rights, and advanced economy, is clearly able and willing to carry out all UN Charter obligations. In terms of population, Taiwan, with 23,5 million people, would rank in the top quartile of UN member states; its population exceeds the combined population of the 49 least populated UN member states. In terms of economy, Taiwan has a per capita income of 32,123 in 2021; it is the No. 16 trading state in the world and ranks No. 17 in GDP. Taiwan is the No. 6 trading partner of the United States, its foreign exchange reserves rank among the top five in the world, and its IT and related industry ranks No. 3 in the world. Especially noteworthy is Taiwan’s political transformation from authoritarian rule based on martial law to a free, democratic state with strong commitments to human rights.

Beijing’s opposite position is formulated in the “White Paper” titled *The One China Principle and the Taiwan Issue* released on 21February 2000, a few weeks before the presidential election in Taiwan that was won by a large margin by the pro-independent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shui-bian: “Taiwan is ineligible for membership in the United Nations and other international organizations whose membership is confined to sovereign states. The United Nations is an inter-governmental international organization composed of sovereign states. After the restoration of the lawful rights of the PRC in the United Nations, the issue of China’s representation in the UN was resolved once and for all and Taiwan’s re-entry became totally out of the question. The Taiwan authorities have asserted that Resolution 2758 of the UN resolved only “the problem of China’s representation,” but not “the problem of Taiwan’s representation,” and demanded participation in the UN. We will never permit such a separatist act of creating “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

As the *realpolitik* is valued higher than the principles formulated in the UN Charter and other related international treaties and declarations, the latter position is the one that counts on the international arena today. Several other “White Papers” and *Principles* have been issued by Beijing’s government to confirm its strong and unchangeable position regarding Taiwan as an “inalienable part of China” and “Unification of the Motherland” under the “One China” principle.

On 30 January 1995, Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the CPC and Chairman of the PRC, delivered an important speech entitled *Continuing to Strive Toward the Reunification of China* where he put forward eight propositions on the development of relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits and peaceful reunification of China. These proposals formulated in comparatively mild tone serve as the basis of PRC’s Taiwan policy until today. The principal ideas of these proposals are as follows:

“1. We must firmly oppose any words or actions aimed at creating an "independent Taiwan" and the propositions “split the country and rule under separate regimes," “two Chinas over a certain period of time,” etc., which are in contravention of the principle of one China.

2. We do not challenge the development of non-governmental economic and cultural ties by Taiwan with other countries. ... However, we oppose Taiwan’s activities in “expanding its living space internationally,” which are aimed at creating “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan.” /.../

3. It has been our consistent stand to hold negotiations with the Taiwan authorities on the peaceful unification of the motherland. /.../ I suggest that, as the first step, negotiations should be held and an agreement reached on officially ending the state of hostility between the two sides in accordance with the principle that there is only one China. /.../

4. We should strive for the peaceful unification of the motherland, since Chinese should not fight fellow Chinese. Our not undertaking to give up the use of force is not directed against our compatriots in Taiwan but against the schemes of foreign forces to interfere with China's unification and to bring about the “independence of Taiwan.” /.../

5. Great efforts should be made to expand the economic exchanges and cooperation between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. /.../

6. People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should inherit and carry forward the fine traditions of Chinese culture.

7. The 21 million compatriots in Taiwan, whether born there or in other provinces, are all Chinese. /.../ We also hope that all political parties in Taiwan will adopt a sensible, forward-looking, and constructive attitude and promote the expansion of relations between the two sides. /.../

8. Leaders of Taiwan authorities are welcome to pay visits in appropriate capacities. We are also ready to accept invitations from the Taiwan side to visit Taiwan. /.../ The affairs of the Chinese people should be handled by ourselves, something that does not take an international occasion to accomplish. /.../”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Reading these proposals now, we have to make notice that these were made before handing over Hong Kong and Macau to the PRC, when China’s leaders hoped that a similar way could be applicable to Taiwan too. Their attitude changed radically when the Taiwanese pro-independent president Lee Teng-Hui was re-elected in the first direct popular elections in 1996, and especially when he proposed his “state-to-state relations” project in 1999.

With development of democracy and pro-Taiwan sentiments in the island in the early 2000s, Beijing rhetoric as well as actions have turned more severe, and the possible use of force is mentioned more often. The style of the *White Paper on National Defence* issued at the end of 2004 is a good example of it. HereBeijing declares that using military force to attack Taiwan is not at all out of agenda: “It is the sacred responsibility of the Chinese armed forces to stop the “Taiwan independence” forces from splitting the country. The Chinese government continues to adhere to the basic principles of “peaceful reunification” and “one country, two systems” along with the eight-point proposal on developing cross-Straits relations and advancing the process of peaceful reunification of the motherland at the current stage. So long as the Taiwan authorities accept the one China principle and stop their separatist activities aimed at “Taiwan independence,” cross-Straits talks can be held at any time on officially ending the state of hostility between the two sides, including on the establishment of a confidence-building mechanism in the military field. The Chinese people are resolutely opposed to all separatist activities in whatever manifestation aimed at “Taiwan independence,” to foreign interference of any form, and to arms sales to Taiwan or entrance to military alliance of any form with Taiwan by any country in the world. We will never allow anyone to split Taiwan from China through whatever means. Should the Taiwan authorities go so far as to make a reckless attempt that constitutes a major incident of “Taiwan independence,” the Chinese people and armed forces will resolutely and thoroughly crush it at any cost.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Such bellicose rhetoric has continued up to our days and become more severe in very recent time, being accompanied with military actions as frequent breaking of PRC’s military aircraft into the airspace controlled by Taiwan in 2021 and 2022.

*“One China” doctrine and Imperial Legacy*

Ross Terrill, in his fascinating book full of sharp political analysis *New Chinese Empire*, calls the “One China” principle “a political theology of today’s China” explaining the statement: “It is a fiction created to deny the reality of China’s diversity and the anachronism of the PRC’s mode of governance. There is just One China, runs the mantra. “Since ancient times,” Tibet and Xinjiang have been part of it. Taiwan, despite appearances, *cannot possibly be* a sovereign entity. Variations of the mantra cover Mongolia and Manchuria.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

To understand the ambitions of the rulers of today’s China and their inclination toward the authoritarian style of government, one has to look back into the country’s history. China has been an empire with over 2000 years of history. Dynasties have risen and fallen; periods of unification and strong centralization of power have changed with interludes of disunion. What has remained unchanged is the China-centered ideology held by its political elite from generation to generation considering “Chineseness” as an ultimate value in terms of both civilization and polity, and a strong empire as the best (read: only possible) way to accomplish it. These principles were observed the section 2.3. of this report. Here some crucial points will be dealt with again.

The ancient Chinese sage Confucius (Kong Fuzi or Kong Zi, 551–479 BCE) valued civilization as the highest achievement of humankind and designated the man of culture and education, holder of civilization, as a ‘noble one’ (君子 *jūn zǐ*). Within a few centuries his gentle teaching was, however, heavily politicized and changed into the main tool of Chinese ancient imperialism and chauvinism; the idea of the ‘empire’ gained dominance over the idea of ‘civilization’ and the idea of the ‘loyal official’ over the idea of free spirit and altruism of the nobleman. The Legalist autocratic model of the government – totalitarian in its extreme form – became the long-lasting pattern of Chinese statecraft.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Implementation of the Confucian-Legalist ideology in the policy of imperial China during successive dynasties beginning with Qin in the 3rd century BCE up to the 20th century led to the absolutism of the state with the sacred institution of the Emperor – Son of Heaven – in the centre and officials-literati called ‘father and mother’ (父母 *fù mǔ*) of the people as executives in the court and provincial offices.

Following this ideology, the Chinese realm was equalled with the universe called ‘All Under the Heaven’ (天下 *tiān xià*), and the term thus obtained a political meaning. Other countries and peoples leaving outside the Chinese realm were considered not as independent political units but as potential and – what is important to keep in mind – legitimate subjects of the Son of Heaven. Foreign policy in terms of imperial China differed fundamentally from that in the Western terms, meaning not establishing relations between equal partners but looking for the ways of subjugation of other countries to the Emperor’s power.

The ultimate idea of Chineseness, i.e., the supreme civilization plus the ideal political order, gave China in its self-imagination the legitimate authority over other nations. “Barbarians” were being treated in two alternative ways: the obedient were promoted and the disobedient “pacified”. Ultimate bless for them was to be incorporated in the greater realm of China that meant, according to the imperial-Confucian ideology, to become civilized. The political ideal was ‘Great Unity’ (大同 *dà tóng*) – the state where all realms Under the Heaven were pacified by the Son of Heaven and lived in peace and harmony under his benevolent rule.

This ideal transferred into ideology fuelled the political machinery of the Chinese Empire for centuries. In practical policy, it meant almost ceaseless wars with “barbarians” of the border areas; fighting with bloody uprisings inland; campaigns against the disobedient neighbours; and sophisticated but always paternalistic diplomacy with others who were either too strong to be pacified with direct military means or too distant to reach or who found themselves that good terms with the ‘Middle Kingdom’ (中國 *zhōng guó*) – the self-title of China – could bring more benefit than resistance.

With triumphs and withdrawals, China slowly extended its territory from the historical Chinese (central) realm in the Huanghe valley in all directions on land (Russia did it in a similar way since the 16th century) becoming by the end of the 18th century a vast multinational mainland empire that included Mongolia in the North and Manchuria in the Northeast, Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and Tibet in the West, Yunnan in the Southwest, and Taiwan in the East. Korea and Vietnam more or less retained the status of vassal-states periodically altering their form of government from total or partial annexation by China up to virtual independence.

Enjoying its greatness and supreme position in the Eastern part of the Eurasian continent, China cared less about what happened outside its realms. The rise of the Europe in the West did not reach into the consciousness of the Chinese as an important event. Europeans who had arrived in China with commercial or missionary aims since the middle of the 16th century were considered as regular barbarians whom the Chinese court had seen to come and go so many throughout centuries. Obfuscated by its highly ideologized world-view, China submerged into a kind of cultural autism that hindered it to assess the world and events realistically, to say nothing of changing its attitude.

Therefore, there is nothing to wonder about the arrogant answer of Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1735–1796) to King George III of Great Britain when the latter’s envoy Lord George Macartney arrived in the Beijing court in 1793 to persuade the Chinese to open their markets to Britain. The letter often quoted in sinological books begins with the following passage: “We, by the grace of Heaven, Emperor, instruct the King of England to take note of our charge. Although your country, O King, lies in the far ocean, yet inclining your heart toward civilization, you have specially sent an envoy respectfully to present a state message, and sailing the seas, he has come to our Court to kowtow and to present congratulations for the imperial birthday, and also to present local products, thereby showing your sincerity. We have perused the text of your state message and the wording expresses your earnestness. From it your sincere humility and obedience can clearly be seen. It is admirable and we fully approve…”[[51]](#footnote-51)

And finally, England’s proposals were, of course, neglected: “We have never valued ingenious articles nor do we have the slightest need of your country’s manufactures.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

Students of Chinese history assess this diplomatic act performed in very Chinese style as crucial in leading to fatal consequences for China in the next century. If emperor had not refused Britons’ proposals and opened China’s doors to the outside world through commerce, would then the integration of China into the modern world have started half a century earlier as it really did, and would it have run more smoothly? Nobody knows the adequate answer to this question. What we know is the history that brought humiliating defeats for China in a number of wars with Westerners during the 19th century; occupying the key positions in the country’s trade and economy by foreigners; and finally, by the end of dynasty, painful recognition by the Chinese themselves that China was not the powerful centre of the world any more but rather a backward periphery. This issue was dealt in greater detail in section 2.2. of this report.

The twentieth century, however, did not bring any real breakthrough or change in the millennia-old imperial mentality of the Middle Kingdom but rather saw the emergence of the spirit of revanchism and revival of great-Chinese (*han*) chauvinism. Liberal and republican movements evolved mainly among intellectuals, and endeavours for wide-scale modernization of China started in the last decades of the Qing dynasty and culminated with the “May Forth Movement” in 1919. Although they enriched Chinese social and political theory with many modern Western-style ideas, China was not able to implement them in the practical policy-making mechanism, at least not for long time.

Sun Yat-sen, although thoroughly republican, did not abandon the Greater China idea, as we saw in section 2.3. His Republic of China was imaged in the old imperial borders including five principal ethnicities: Han-Chinese, Manchus, Mongolians, Hui-Muslims, and Tibetans. Han nationalism was an integral part of his political program. The leaders who rose to political power after the 1911–1912 revolution that overthrew the two-and-half-century-long rule of the Qing dynasty of Manchus (1644–1911), no matter whether local warlords in the provinces or heads of the central government, fatally returned to the imperial style of government merely modified by some Western elements but, regrettably, most often by the authoritarian, not liberal ones.

Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), the first president of the Republic of China, openly declared himself a new emperor, founder of the new dynasty, at the end of 1915, merely four years after founding the republic. We do not know in which way China would have gone if the self-styled emperor had not died three months later and his faction lost support.

After unifying the Southern, Eastern and Central provinces under the Nationalist government in the late 1920s, Chiang Kai-shek did not go on to liberalize China’s polity but created a dictatorship in the form of a one-party state with his Nationalist Party – Kuomintang (KMT) – as the only political organization allowed and totally monopolizing the power. Chiang officially rehabilitated Confucianism as the ideology of the ROC, thus creating a direct link between his party-state and imperial China of the past. So, the policy of KMT’s China was rather a marriage of the slightly modernized imperial-style government with the Western-style autocratic model flourishing at that time in Europe (Italy, Germany). A great deal of the experience of the Leninist party-state of the Soviet Union was also implemented.

Mao Zedong, the leader of the successful rural uprising, never concealed that his greatest political paragon was the cruel First Emperor, Qin Shihuang (ruled as emperor in 221–210 BCE), a highly effective military leader and political administrator who unified China and, applying the Legalist model of statecraft in its extremity, created a super-centralized and militarized empire. Later dynasties, though less cruel in political methods, in mainstream, however, all followed the First Emperor’s pattern. So did the new Red Emperor titling himself simply as Chairman (主席 *zhǔ xí*)[[53]](#footnote-53).

As other Chinese leaders of the twentieth century, Mao too could not manage without a foreign political theory. He chose Marxism-Leninism for the foreign supplement of his imperial project. If Marxism remained largely just a rhetorical adornment in Mao’s political programme, not taken too seriously by Chairman himself, Leninism as practical policy was implemented widely as well harmonizing with the ancient Legalist theory and meeting the demands of the new party-state of China. As a result, the most cruel, totalitarian political regime in the long history of China was created that lasted until Mao’s death in 1976 and continues in a somewhat milder form nowadays. Demanding the world’s countries to recognize its irrational “One China” doctrine to empower its authority over the *de facto* sovereign State of Taiwan is only one example of “new old China’s” implementation of imperial style into modern policy. After a short somewhat “milder” period of reforms which China used to accumulate wealth and power, the current chairman Xi Jinping has returned to the harsher rhetoric and political practices in both domestic and foreign politics to assert the “One China” principle.

It is justifiable to conclude this paragraph with another observation by Ross Terrill on the imperial character of today’s Chinese party-state: “The old Chinese empire, like all empires, was created by force, yet its distinction and durability mostly lay in culture and social morality. China has lost the old virtue, but failed to learn a new virtue. Thus is it half-empire and half-modern nation.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

*Internationalization of the “One China” Principle: The Initiative of the United States*

The new era in the foreign policy of the PRC started in the early 1970s, tearing it out from virtual international isolation and giving it a chance to declare its demands to international community in a lauder voice. The Taiwan issue has always been a crucial point in Beijing’s foreign policy.

The midwife of the birth of the “One China” policy into the world of international politics was nobody else than the president of the US Richard Nixon who started the program of normalizing relations with China in the early 1970s. The shadow figure behind the president shaping his China-policy was then assistant to the president for national security affairs, Dr. Henry Kissinger. Nixon’s historical visit to China – “the week that changed the world” – in February 1972 was preceded by two secret trips of Kissinger in the previous year. Nixon met with Mao Zedong and had several talks with Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976). The main outcome of the visit was signing the joint document by Nixon and Zhou known as the *Shanghai Communiqué* where both sides expressed their views on crucial issues of international politics (Indochina, Korea, Japan, the India-Pakistan conflict, and, of course, Taiwan) and declared their will to normalize relations and start a constructive dialogue despite differences in positions and ideologies.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The “One China” principle was worded there in two formulations expressing the positions of both sides: “The Chinese reaffirmed its position: The Taiwan question is the crucial question obstructing the normalization of relations between China and the United States; the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government of China; Taiwan is a province of China which has long been returned to the motherland; the liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere; and all U.S. forces and military installations must be withdrawn from Taiwan. The Chinese Government firmly opposes any activities which aim at the creation of “one China, one Taiwan,” “one China, two governments,” “two Chinas,” an “independent Taiwan” or advocate that “the status of Taiwan remains to be determined.”

“The U.S. side declared: The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan. In the meantime, it will progressively reduce its forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

As we see, the US only “acknowledges” the right of “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait” to interpret the issue in their own manner but does not recognize the Beijing position. This basic statement has, in fact, remained unchanged for half a century and has been followed by most of the countries in the world that have diplomatic relationships with the PRC.

The breakthrough with the US was a very important issue for Mao Zedong at the moment to convince his own people and the outside world once again that he was a great statesman. Since the relations with the former ally, Soviet Union, that was changed into a “hegemon” in the political rhetoric of the PRC, had been frozen for years already, and the hostility between the two countries had escalated up to the border conflicts in the late 1968s, China was lacking reliable allies and was in virtual diplomatic isolation despite its attempts in the dimension of the “Third World”. In the domestic policy too, the “cultural revolution” had turned the country into a chaos and had not brought desired result of converging people more closely around the Chairman. Thus, Mao urgently needed a new boost, and the American initiative became the life belt for the “Great Helmsman”. Establishing relations with former enemy number one was also a great challenge to Moscow.

The *Shanghai Communiqué* was preceded by four months with PRC’s triumph in the UN. On 25 October 1971, the UN GA overwhelmingly (76-35-17) voted for Resolution 2758 on *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations* proposed by the delegation of the true ally of China, Albania, while two other proposals – the US proposal for the “two Chinas” plan, calling for the PRC to enter the UN, but allowing the ROC to keep its seat, and the third one put forth by Saudi Arabia, which advocated that the PRC should obtain the right to represent China in the UN, including a permanent seat in the Security Council, but that Taiwan should also remain in the UN under the name of Taiwan – were rejected. The full text of the resolution is as follows:

**Resolution 2758 (XXVI)**

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,

Recalling the principles of the Charter of the United Nations,

Considering the restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China is essential both for the protection of the Charter of the United Nations and for the cause that the United Nations must serve under the Charter.

Recognizing that the representatives of the Government of the People’s Republic of China are the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations and that the People's Republic of China is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council,

Decides to restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognize the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it.

1967th plenary meeting

25 October 1971[[57]](#footnote-57)

The vote result was an unexpected stroke to Washington that before the fatal decision of the UN GA had expected the scenario of “Two Chinas” to materialize and consequently to push Beijing to recognize Taiwan as a distinct state. The next day’s *New York Times* reflected the last night’s events in the UN: “The American delegation, also in the front row, sat in total dejection. George Bush, the United States delegate, who had been leading the fight for Nationalist China with considerable energy, half turned away from the rostrum, looking silently at the turbulent scene. /…/ Meeting with newsmen shortly before midnight at the United States Mission across the street from the United Nations, Bush said he hoped the world organization would “not relive this moment of infamy.” /…/ “The United Nations crossed a very dangerous bridge tonight,” he said. Expressing surprise at the vote, he added: “I thought we would win and it would be very, very close.””[[58]](#footnote-58)

Failure in the UN forced Nixon and Kissinger to quickly change their tactic and find a satisfying solution in the “One China” framework that resulted in the ambiguous formulation of the above-mentioned passage of the *Shanghai Communiqué*. So, we can say that in the first round Zhou Enlai’s secret diplomacy surpassed Kissinger’s, and, ironically, with the help of the US themselves lit the green light to the implementation of the “One China” principle in international politics in the interpretation of the PRC.

Neither the administration of Nixon nor of Gerald Ford which followed him in the White House did not, however, hurry to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Actually, the US did it only 7 years later under the presidency of the democrat Jimmy Carter. In the joint communiqué from 1 January 1979 (article 2), the US declared once again: “The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.”

And again, in article 7: “The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

Again, although the US “recognizes” the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China, it only “acknowledges” its “One China” doctrine considering Taiwan as part of China.

Establishing official relations with Washington who simultaneously cancelled these with Taipei was the next win of Beijing’s government in the diplomatic game with the US, now giving credit to Deng Xiaoping’s who had recently returned to the top echelon of CCP and, holding the post of vice-premier, had vigorously launched the reform campaign and the “open doors” policy. Conservative republican Ronald Reagan who replaced Carter in the White House two years later was highly critical of the administration’s pro-PRC policy commenting the event: “The “breakthrough” the Pres. announced on Dec. 15th was, as I said earlier, not a breakthrough at all. We simply gave in to Peking’s demands. /…/ Now I believe there are things the Congress can do to lessen the damage that has been done & I’ll talk about this on the next broadcast. But one thing cannot be changed; the nations of the world have seen us cold bloodedly betray a friend for political expediency. That memory will not go away.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Beijing’s demands Reagan notes in his comment were: abolishing diplomatic relations with the ROC; breaking the defence treaty with Taiwan; and removal of all American military from Taiwan. Carter-Brzezinski team agreed with these, deserving again Reagan’s sound criticism: “We must remember also that Red China was the supplicant, the rulers in Peking wanted full diplomatic recognition, mainly because of their hostile relations with the Soviets. They had everything to gain from recognition, we gained *VIRTUALLY* nothing *we didn’t already have*.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

The US Congress, indeed, did its job “to lessen the damage that has been done” by unanimously adopting three months later *The Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA), the document that has served as the basis of US-Taiwan relations for more than 40 years. The *Policy* chapter of the TRA contains 6 articles:

It is the policy of the United States –

(1) to preserve and promote extensive, close, and friendly commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and the people on Taiwan, as well as the people on the China mainland and all other peoples of the Western Pacific area;

(2) to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern;

(3) to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means;

(4) to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States;

(5) to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and

(6) to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Reagan himself, while in the White House, also contributed to the Congressional initiative to maintain US’s unofficial relations with Taiwan and be the security guarantor for the island against the military threat from communist mainland. In 1982 his administration released the “Six Assurances” to Taiwan.

1. The United States would not set a date for termination of arms sales to Taiwan.

2. The United States would not alter the terms of the *Taiwan Relations Act*.

3. The United States would not consult with China in advance before making decisions about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

4. The United States would not mediate between Taiwan and China.

5. The United States would not alter its position about the sovereignty of Taiwan which was that the question was one to be decided peacefully by the Chinese themselves, and would not pressure Taiwan to enter into negotiations with China.

6. The United States would not formally recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.[[63]](#footnote-63)

This document counterbalanced the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China on arms sales to Taiwan from 17 August 1982.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The US presidents and administrations following Reagan have generally acted according to the TRA and Reagan’s “Assurances”. Most recent are President Joe Biden’s declarations to continue to protect Taiwan, e.g., the 22 October 2021 statement: “The U.S. defense relationship with Taiwan is guided by the *Taiwan Relations Act*. We will uphold our commitment under the Act, we will continue to support Taiwan’s self-defense, and we will continue to oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

In the 1970s, the PRC made a robust breakthrough to the international arena using adroitly the US’s interest to play out the China card in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The greater winner in this game, no doubt, as Reagan said, was Beijing. It got several advantages: the world’s most powerful country as an ally – a case that made Beijing a dignified player in the eyes of other countries who rapidly followed the US example to build official relationships with Communist China, which had been almost written off before. The permanent seat in the UN Security Council made China feel as one of the world’s most powerful states like it had not felt since the Opium Wars in the 1830s–40s. Gradual opening of its market to foreign goods and investments since late 1970s made China a desired partner for Western powers who little by little suggested themselves that, despite its dreadful political system, China deserves special treatment and certain allowances, and that economy and politics must be handled separately in the case of China. Beijing, however, often uses economic means to force foreign governments to make their political decisions in favour of China; this again is the method directly borrowed from the practice of the Chinese Empire of the past. This tendency has grown enormously during last decade under the chairmanship of Xi Jinping.

*China and Taiwan: Current Stalemate*

Since the 1980s, the Taiwanese state and society have undergone fundamental changes from one-party dictatorship into a country practicing full-scale democracy. This development has been accompanied with rising consciousness of Taiwan identity of its people instead of Chinese identity. Despite tightening economic ties and growing Taiwanese investments on the mainland, the gap between two societies on both sides of the Taiwan Strait has widened significantly during the last three decades, and today only a few per cent of Taiwanese consider unification of Taiwan with China under the communist rule an eligible choice.

According to the Freedom House report *Freedom in the World 2021*, among 210 monitored countries and territories, China belongs to the “not free” category with the Total Score and Status Index of 9 out of 100. The same subgroup with China with the same index includes countries like Belarus, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Laos, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. To compare, Taiwan belongs to the “free” group with Total Score and Status Index of 94; in Asia, only Japan, Mongolia, and South Korea have a freedom index as similar or higher as Taiwan of 96, 84 and 83 respectively.[[66]](#footnote-66)

To add some flesh to the bones of figures, a passage from the separate report about China could serve as an example: “China’s authoritarian regime has become increasingly repressive in recent years. The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to tighten control over all aspects of life and governance, including the state bureaucracy, the media, online speech, religious practice, universities, businesses, and civil society associations, and it has undermined an earlier series of modest rule-of-law reforms. The CCP leader and state president, Xi Jinping, has consolidated personal power to a degree not seen in China for decades. Human rights activists and lawyers continue to speak out, though at great personal cost.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Many students of the recent history of Taiwan consider the Kaohsiung incident of 10 December 1979 a turning point in the political change in the country. That day, some opposition groups who had got a few liberties after Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–1988), son of Chiang Kai-shek, had succeeded the late generalissimo as the president of the ROC, celebrated the International Day of Human Rights for the first time in Taiwan with a sanctioned meeting in the southern city of Kaohsiung. Engaged brawlers, however, provoked a clash with the military police, and afterwards tens of opposition leaders and human rights activists were arrested and trialled.

Despite the seeming backlash, democratic movement started to advance first as the “outside party” (黨外 *dǎng wài*) movement that transformed into the first full-scale opposition party to KMT in Taiwan – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – in 1987 after a law allowing opposition parties was issued. In the same year, martial law was abolished, and next year, after Chiang passed away, the vice president chosen by him – Lee Teng-hui (1923–2020) – became the first Taiwan-born president of the ROC.

Lee vigorously continued the policy towards democratization of the society and political reform initiated by his predecessor. In 1991, the first general elections of the parliament of ROC or Legislative Yuan were held since the KMT government fled to Taiwan in 1949. Though KMT still remained the ruling party for a decade, DPP enlarged its representation in the parliament from election to election and in 1997 got a substantial win in the local election, including in the capital, Taipei. Tens of minor parties also emerged and started to partake in the political life. In the 1990s, several changes to the constitution of the ROC were adopted to make it more appropriate for the altered political reality. In 1996, the first direct popular presidential election was held, which was overwhelmingly won by Lee Teng-hui for his third period in office.

Progress of democracy in Taiwan and increasing pro-Taiwanese consciousness made Beijing nervous, and, during the 1990s, the leaders of the PRC implemented a kind of “stick and carrot” policy in the cross-strait relations. On one hand, they promoted economic and trade contacts, especially Taiwanese investments into mainland’s economy and promised to keep Taiwanese domestic policy unaltered if only the latter agreed to Beijing’s “One China” principle and submitted itself under the rule of communist China (an example is former chairman Jiang Zemin’s “eight points proposal” cited above). On the other hand, in numerous “white papers”, governmental press releases, leaders’ speeches etc., Beijing never got tired of threatening Taiwan to use force if ever the latter dared declare formal independence. Campaigning internationally to keep Taiwan in diplomatic isolation and away from international organizations that require statehood from their members also belongs to the “stick” category of actions.

In the early 1990s some attempts were made to initiate negotiations between the two sides that, in principle, could include political questions, and the representatives of semi-official organizations – PRC’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan’s Strait Exchange Foundation – specially set up for such kind of talks met in Hong Kong in November 1992 and in Singapore in April next year where the so called 1992 consensus was reached.

In this consensus, the ROC still held its own “One China” position, formulated in the following way: “Both sides of the Taiwan Strait agree that there is only one China. However, the two sides of the Strait have different opinions as to the meaning of “one China.” To Peking, “one China” means the “People’s Republic of China (PRC),” with Taiwan to become a “Special Administration Region” after unification. Taipei, on the other hand, considers “one China” to mean the Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1911 and with de jure sovereignty over all of China. The ROC, however, currently has jurisdiction only over Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. Taiwan is part of China, and the Chinese mainland is part of China as well.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Both sides reached a kind of consensus “to disagree on “One China””, but that was all. As Taipei required that the future negotiations should be based on the principle of parity of both sides, Beijing, however, demanded that negotiations could only be held if its side is recognized as the central government and Taiwan as a province of China. The negotiating process was actually frozen before any political question was even selected for discussion.

During his third term as president (1996–2000), Lee Teng-hui gradually withdrew from the “One China” consensus as inappropriate for the political reality evolved and made a step forward declaring that negotiations between Taiwan and China would only be possible on the “state-to-state” basis. Proclaimed in 1999, this position has in principle remained unchanged until now but made Beijing even more intolerant and stubbornly relying on its “One China” doctrine. The core of Lee’s statement is as follows: “The fact that disregarding the reality that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are under separate administrations of different governments, the Chinese communist authorities have been threatening us with force is actually the main reason why cross-strait ties cannot be improved thoroughly. /.../ Since the PRC’s establishment, the Chinese communists have never ruled Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, which have been under the jurisdiction of the Republic of China. /.../ Since our constitutional reform in 1991, we have designated cross-strait ties as nation-to-nation, or at least as special state-to-state ties, rather than internal ties within “one China” between a legitimate government and a rebellion group, or between central and local governments.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

So far, the 2000s have not brought the solution to the China-Taiwan political crisis nearer but it has become more complex rather. In Taiwan, the democratization and reforming of the country’s political system is in progress. In 2000, Chen Shui-bian, a candidate of distinctly pro-independence DPP, won the presidential election, and so KMT’s half a century power was shifted. DDP’s government continued Lee Teng-hui’s “taiwanization” policy with the final aim to change the historical anachronism – the ROC – into the modern nation-state of Taiwan. In realpolitik, however, since Taiwan’s leaders must take the broader international political and security context into consideration in every political step or pronouncement, the pro-independence rhetoric is prudently kept muffled. Under the pressure of the US, the main guarantor of security and military balance in the Western Pacific as well as almost only supplier of weapons for Taiwan, holding the “status quo” has become a key expression in the cross-strait policy of recent years.

To calm Washington and show Taiwan’s goodwill to Beijing, in his inauguration speech in May 2000, Chen pledged to keep “five noes” as guidelines of the policy of his government. He said: “As long as the CCP regime has no intention to use military force against Taiwan, I pledge that during my term in office, I will not declare independence, I will not change the national title, I will not push forth the inclusion of the so-called “state-to-state” description in the Constitution, and I will not promote a referendum to change the status quo in regards to the question of independence or unification. Furthermore, the abolition of the National Reunification Council or the National Reunification Guidelines will not be an issue.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

In a more diplomatic language, these pledges were repeated with the addition to establish a special Committee for Cross-Strait Peace and Development in Chen’s inaugural speech in 2004 when he was taking office for his second term after winning the election in March: “Today I would like to reaffirm the promises and principles set forth in my inaugural speech in 2000. Those commitments have been honored – they have not changed over the past four years, nor will they change in the next four years. Upon this foundation, my next step will be to invite both the governing and opposition parties, in conjunction with representatives from various walks of the society, to participate in the establishment of a “Committee for Cross-Strait Peace and Development,” combining the collective insight and wisdom of all parties and our citizenry, to draft the “Guidelines for Cross-Strait Peace and Development.” The goal will be to pave the way for formulating a new relationship of cross-strait peace, stability and sustainable development.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

Concurrently, Chen Shui-bian complemented Lee’s “state-to-state” theory with the issue of “one country on each side” in 2002 that clearly opposes the PRC’s “One China” doctrine. His initiative to write a new constitution for Taiwan by the year 2008 and adoption of the referendum law by the Legislative Yuan in the autumn of 2003 were both met in Beijing as steps of “splittist activity”. Moreover, in October 2004 Chen expressed his readiness to turn back to the 1992 consensus, but none of his “olive branches” have so far been admitted by Beijing.

In the 2008 presidential elections, KMT made its comeback with Ma Ying-jeou who was elected to presidency. During his two terms in office (2008–2016), he made some steps to approach the PRC, but these were very unpopular in Taiwan. So, in the 2016 elections, DPP with its candidate Tsai Ing-wen won and DPP returned to power. Tsai’s administration prudently holds a pro-Taiwanese position but in real policy is keeping the status quo. Tsai was re-elected for the second term in 2020.

In 2002–2004, the PRC also passed through leadership shift. Jiang Zemin, general secretary of the CCP and head of the state from 1989, gradually abandoned his posts and Hu Jintao and the so-called “fourth generation” leadership took office. Finally, during the CCP Central Committee plenum in September 2004, Jiang retired from his last responsibility of Chairman of the Central Military Commission that is counted as the third important position in the hierarchy of the PRC party state since its chairman has virtual control over army and generals whose consensus in the party and state affairs is of grave importance.

Although the Western press hoped Hu to be a liberal ruler, kind of “Chinese Gorbachev”, his first years in office did not show any movements toward political reform but rather strengthening the hard-line style in domestic and foreign policy and turning back to the cold war rhetoric. A passage from his speech held at the above-mentioned plenum that was not published in the press and appeared in a Hong Kong newspaper only few months later is a great example that nothing had changed: “Enemy forces always use public opinion to build a propaganda base. International monopoly-capitalist groups led by the US relied on ideology to bring down the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party was absolutely not a defeat of Marxism and socialism. In the final analysis, it was the result of a gradual distancing from, turning the back on, and betrayal of Marxism, socialism and the fundamental interests of the people. Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev is the culprit behind the great changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and a betrayer of socialism. He is absolutely not a meritorious statesman, and anyone who says he is does not stand on the side of the Soviet people and human progress. /…/ When managing ideology, we have to learn from Cuba and North Korea. Although North Korea has encountered temporary economic problems, its policies are consistently correct.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

The hard-line policy in cross-strait relations culminated with adoption of the The Anti-Secession Law, at the Third Session of the Tenth National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China on March 14, 2005.[[73]](#footnote-73) Article 2 of the law states: “There is only one China in the world. Both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China. China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity brook no division. Safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity is the common obligation of all Chinese people, the Taiwan compatriots included.

Taiwan is part of China. The state shall never allow the “Taiwan independence” secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

Article 8 legalises “non-peaceful means” for reunification of Taiwan in certain conditions: “In the event that the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

During Xi Jinping’s “fifth generation” leadership since 2013, authoritarianism in Beijing’s policy has rapidly grown as we have demonstrated above in Preface and Sections 2.2. and 2.3.

As a conclusion, we may fix that, at the moment, no side is planning cardinal steps toward changing the status quo evolved. This also serves best the interests of the US trying to do everything not to be involved in the possible military conflict in the Western Pacific. As Philip Yang’s study proves: “Taiwan is a state, though an isolated democracy”[[76]](#footnote-76), and from the standpoint of international law it has full right to *de jure* independence but in *realpolitik* it needs the recognition of the international community. This, in its turn, is hardly to be realized since consensus between both sides – China and Taiwan – is not reached. This, however, does not seem to be possible without cardinal changes in Beijing’s attitude. When and under which conditions this will happen is impossible to predict now, as the quick and unexpected switching of power in Moscow in 1991 that gave independence to the Baltic countries and other former Soviet republics was not predicted correctly even by experts.

So far, the PRC is a growing military threat for Taiwan and the whole Western Pacific region. The US as a political and military superpower with its allies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Philippines) is still able to counterbalance China, but other countries have also responsibility. As Christopher Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong said: “China is at the end of an era. Marxism and Maoism are dead and buried. Leninism is going the same way. What more does the Communist party have to offer than cynicism and decadence? /…/ Its hope is that capitalism will so improve living standards for the majority of the Chinese people as to sustain its authority to govern.”[[77]](#footnote-77)

And again: “China should be treated just like we would treat anyone else, not on the basis of voodoo or on the assumption that it requires its own rule book.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

However, today we see that little has changed in the world’s policy concerning the PRC and its “One China” demands. So, this great narrative is still in power and irrefutably influences international relations in favour of the PRC.

* 1. **The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation**

The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中華民族偉大復興 *zhōng huá mín zú wěi dà fù xīng*) has been a dominating narrative of Chinese leadership within the last ten years. It was launched by Xi Jinping immediately after his rise to power in 2012 and has become the landmark of his political program. It is often paired with the slogan of Chinese dream (中國夢 *zhōng guó mèng*), actually constituting the latter’s political substance. ‘Chinese dream’ itself is a vague term widely discussed and debated from very different viewpoints in both Chinese and Western academic discourses from sociological research on attitudes, expectations and values of the Chinese people to the highly politicized concept framing the CPC’s political objectives.

The Chinese roots of the very slogan may lie in the ancient concept of the ideal past making rulers and philosophers of the periods of turmoil “dream” about such a perfect past when sage kings ruled All-Under-Heaven and Great Harmony prevailed. In Chinese political religion, progress and development have always been seen as a return to the past, i.e. restoring the previous glory and prosperity that once ruled. Today’s goal of the ‘Great rejuvenation’ follows similar logic: China has to be rejuvenated, returned to the position and power it has possessed once upon a time.

On the other hand, the ‘Chinese Dream’ as a complex of public opinions and expectations of the Chinese people has designed following the model of ‘American Dream’. This aspect has widely been studied by Western, mainly American sociologists and political scientists and been attentively watched and analysed in China. Thus, the ‘Chinese Dream’ as a political concept of the Xi Jinping era explained through the ‘Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ has been elaborated on the basis of these two: the ancient concept of restoration of the past greatness of China and the modern concept of people’s dream of wealth, good life and feeling of proud to be Chinese.

The ‘Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ as a guideline of current Chinese propaganda has several aspects. According to official party sources, the Chinese Dream is the “essence of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This narrative was dealt with in greater detail in section 1.4. It always stresses the importance of Communist Party leadership as the only guarantee to fulfil this goal and keeping Marxism-Leninism as the core of the CPC’s course. As Xi Jinping said in the CPC centenary celebration speech cited earlier: “We must continue to adapt Marxism to the Chinese context. Marxism is the fundamental guiding ideology upon which our Party and country are founded; it is the very soul of our Party and the banner under which it strives. The Communist Party of China upholds the basic tenets of Marxism and the principle of seeking truth from facts. Based on China’s realities, we have developed keen insights into the trends of the day, seized the initiative in history, and made painstaking explorations. We have thus been able to keep adapting Marxism to the Chinese context and the needs of our times, and to guide the Chinese people in advancing our great social revolution. At the fundamental level, the capability of our Party and the strengths of socialism with Chinese characteristics are attributable to the fact that Marxism works.” It also contains sharp criticism of and opposition to any kind of Western values. One of Xi Jinping’s earliest nativist edicts — in 2013, just a year after assuming power — was for the Chinese people to avoid Western values and what he called the “seven unmentionables”. These included “Western constitutional democracy,” human rights, media independence, promoting “universal values” in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership, judicial independence, pro-market liberalism, and “nihilist” criticism of the party’s past.

Another aspect is to continue the building up of China’s economy to make the country number one in the world, the wealthiest and most influential one in economic terms. This goal is close to being fulfilled as China already holds the second position among the countries by the total value of GDP, and operation of global economy completely depends on the wellbeing of Chinese economy and production.

The economic aspect also contains Chinese people’s living standard that, indeed, has improved a lot during Xi’s leadership and reached – according to the party’s rhetoric – the level of “moderate wellbeing” (*xiaokang*).

Very important in this context is the military aspect. In military terms, China has become a regional power, year by year more assertive and aggressive, seriously worrying the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific as well as India forcing them undertake contra-measures and so initiating arms race and a cold war situation in the region. For illustration, again, an excerpt from Xi’s anniversary speech: “On the journey ahead, we must fully implement the Party’s thinking on strengthening the military in the new era as well as our military strategy for the new era, maintain the Party’s absolute leadership over the people’s armed forces, and follow a Chinese path to military development. We will take comprehensive measures to enhance the political loyalty of the armed forces, to strengthen them through reform and technology and the training of competent personnel, and to run them in accordance with the law. We will elevate our people’s armed forces to world-class standards so that we are equipped with greater capacity and more reliable means for safeguarding our national sovereignty, security, and development interests.”

The next aspect is China’s advance at the international level to become an undisputed world leader implementing the Chinese value system, which has been worded as ‘Community of shared future for humankind’ as explained above. This is the main issue China is delivering currently through all its soft power means and capabilities.

One more aspect, which often remains outside of the main discourse on the ‘Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ is ethnic or racial aspect. Literally, in Chinese the slogan means ‘The great rejuvenation of the Chinese *race*’ rather than that of Chinese *nation*, as the word 中華民族 *zhōng huá mín zú* appears there in the meaning of *race*, while usually it is translated as *nation*, which is not correct, as the equivalent for *nation* is 國 *guó* or 國民 *guó mín*. In Xi Jinping’s ethnic policy, forming of the unique and uniform ‘Chinese race’ is one of the central topics. This means that all ethnic minorities should be melted into the Great Chinese people, which, of course, means adopting the Han language and Chinese culture by them. In Western terms, it means total assimilation of all the non-Chinese minority peoples into the Chinese race. This is something similar to the programme developed in the Soviet Union to form a new ethnic community – the Soviet people – on the basis of the great Russian people. The drastic measures of Chineseization already applied in China now are called cultural genocide by some Western human rights organizations.

To fulfil all these goals of the “Great rejuvenation” several programmes have been launched such as “Made in China 2025”, “Belt and Road Initiative”, and “Military-Civil Fusion”.

As a conclusion to this section, we have to assume that, in recent years, Xi has heralded a “new era” that will move China “closer to centre stage” in global politics. He has presented China as “a new option for other countries,” an alternative to Western democracy, and he has outlined what he calls the “Chinese solution” for the world’s problems.

Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” is a rewind to hero-worship politics. He demands increased loyalty to the party and has built a personality cult around himself reminiscent of the founding leader of Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong. Xi’s goals are to preserve the existing domestic political order, to restore the territory seen as lost (namely Taiwan) and to pursue a new global economic dominance and increasing military presence in Asia, and beyond. Xi’s autocratic China is also portrayed as a superior model to established democracies that seem incapable of governing. Or, as the former China editor of BBC, Carrie Gracy, summarized already in 2014: “The politics of the China dream: a rejuvenated authoritarianism.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

1. **Soft power and information warfare. General notes**

The concept of ‘soft power’ appeared into social and political sciences in the 1990s as a descriptive term to label certain strategies and assets the states and governments but also non-state bodies like corporations use in order to persuade other states and target groups to believe their stories and follow their patterns. The purpose of such a soft power engagement is to convince others that it is favourable for them to adopt and share the persuader’s values. Thus, we can define ‘soft power’ as a certain complex of means for influence.

It was the American political scientist Joseph Nye whose 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*[[80]](#footnote-80) made this concept widely known and exploited in political and international relations studies. Nye’s comprehensive definition of soft power is as follows: “A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

In policy and interstate relations, ‘soft power’ has usually been contrasted with ‘hard power’. While the latter consists of traditional military and economic means of executing power to force others to behave as one wishes by applying military deterrence or assault or economic benefits or sanctions, among the ‘soft power’ means, culture, political values, and foreign policies are usually listed. The list, however, may be longer and more articulated in special soft power overviews which aim to rank countries by their soft power performance. One of such lists, for example, contains five issues with explanations: culture – the extent of the nation’s cultural appeal; diplomacy – the strength of diplomatic network; education – the global reputation of its higher education system; business/innovation – the attractiveness of a country’s economic model, and its digital engagements with the world; government – the quality of a country’s political institutions.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Other classifications may be even more detailed and divided, containing a larger number of more-or-less measurable items. The soft power survey platform Soft Power 30, for example, uses as many as 75 metrics across the following six subindices of objective data: digital – a country’s digital infrastructure and its capabilities in digital diplomacy; culture – the global reach and appeal of the nation’s cultural outputs, both pop culture and high culture; enterprise – the attractiveness of a country’s economic model, business friendliness and capacity for innovation; education – the level of human capital in a country, contribution to scholarship, and attractiveness to international students; engagement – the strength of a country’s diplomatic network and its contribution to global engagement and development; government – commitment to freedom, human rights and democracy, and the quality of political institutions.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Soft power as such in one form or another is as old as human civilization and inter-state relationships, but only quite recently, within the last couple of decades, it has become a tool that nations and governments purposely develop, promote, and implement in their policy and international relations. From a merely descriptive term in academic papers, it has transformed into an instrument of practical policy. “Experts agree that soft power delivers all kinds of benefits for nations, their people, businesses, and organizations of all shapes and sizes. A strong nation brand and positive soft power perceptions allow a nation to promote itself as a place for people to visit, invest in, and build a reputation for their quality of goods and services. It also allows a country to rise in the esteem of its neighbours, market its resources and compose the face it presents on the international stage.”[[84]](#footnote-84)

In the early stage of such exploitation, ‘soft power’ was treated as a substantive concept with mainly positive content. It was seen from the perspective of the liberal-democratic system which commonly regarded itself as the sole source of positive soft power including liberal values, human rights, civil liberties and open society, open and effective market economy, freedom of expression and free press, workable democratic institutions, good governance, etc. Gradually it developed into a more technical term independent of its content signifying tools, methods, and procedures states and governments use to enhance each country’s appeal and improve their position in the international system. In his later work, Joseph Nye himself states that soft power is a descriptive rather than normative concept, concluding: “Soft power is not a form of idealism or liberalism. It is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

Today, soft power is a popular instrument that both liberal-democratic and autocratic countries widely use for executing their aim to have more influence and say in world affairs. Alhough hard power has not lost its role and importance in international relations, soft power has clearly ascended to the forefront. Information warfare or “war of narratives” has become more important in the struggle for power and control than the real collision of armed forces or economic performance trade volumes. Soft power is going first. The winner in this competition is the one who has better narratives to attract the people – not so much even the governments – of both its own and rival countries. No less important is to possess technical means and resources as well as communicative skills to submit the narratives and ensure their spread. Thus, the socio-linguistic construction of ‘reality’ has become the first and foremost thing in the soft power struggle that has been called ‘representational force’ by Janice Bially Mattern who further explains: “Representational force is a form of power that operates through the structure of a speaker’s narrative representation of ‘reality’. Specifically, a narrative expresses representational force when it is organized in such a way that it threatens the audience with unthinkable harm unless it submits, in word and in deed, to the terms of the speaker’s viewpoint.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

Such a ‘representational force’ executed through the soft power means and facilities is what great powers are building. Today the key factor is who has better networks of and control over the digital channels and platforms. Large autocratic countries in particular, like Russia and China, have substantially increased their digital capacity to deliver and amplify their narratives abroad and restrict the spread of others’ narratives in their countries using a wide array of resources and facilities, including censoring, hacking, trolling, delivering fake news, etc. This is what Jacob Helberg in his excellent book calls a ‘grey war’ going on in virtual realms of the internet and leaving “real” warfare with hard power means clearly on the secondary position in the struggle for greater influence and domination.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Information warfare is often defined through the concept of strategic narrative. Max Brian Manantan explains it this way: “It [i.e. information warfare – M.L.] is a series of strategic narratives espoused by states which are spread online geared towards winning local and global opinion.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Further, the concept of ‘information environment’ is introduced as a battleground for information warfare: “Competition in this environment occurs within the physical, informational, and cognitive/emotional domain in three distinct forms: propaganda operations, leak operations, and chaos-producing operations. These three categorizations are not mutually exclusive and could reinforce each other to achieve the overall objectives of the strategic narrative. Social media plays a central role through social networking, propaganda as well as (fake) news and (dis)information sharing. Information warfare is executed by building on existing narratives which are amplified through the network of bots to force the algorithm of the social media platform to make the elements that comprised the larger strategic narrative a trending topic. Coercion and persuasion are often used as the decisive factors or key indicators to measure the impact and reach of information warfare.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

1. **China’s soft power engagements**
	1. **Soft power with “Chinese characteristics” or “Telling China’s Story Well”**

When the soft power discourse had been launched in American political sciences and then rapidly developed into the concept of real policymaking in the West, the Chinese elite quickly realized its usefulness in state propaganda. First time, perhaps, the very term of soft power (軟實力 *ruǎn shí lì*) was mentioned in Hu Jintao’s 2007 speech to the CPC 17th National Congress. In the speech, he called the Chinese people to enhance “culture as a part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Here, there is no hint about applying soft power in foreign policy, but nevertheless, later Hu’s speech has often been mentioned as the beginning of the advance of deliberately arranged soft power policy by the CCP. Later important statements and documents give more clues and concrete content to this general guideline.

On 19August 2013, in a speech to the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference, Xi Jinping spelled out his approach to propaganda and international messaging. He urged the country’s propaganda workers to enhance China’s “international discourse power” (国际话语权 *guó jì huà yǔ quán*) as a key aspect of its “comprehensive national power” (综合国力 *zòng hé guó lì*) under the notion of “telling China’s story well” (讲好中国故事 *jiǎng hǎo zhōng guó gù shì*). This notion was submitted as an important part of “external propaganda” (外宣 *wài xuān*): “[We] must meticulously and properly conduct external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China’s story well, communicating China’s voice well.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

In the last decade, Chinese leaders have not saved energy and resources to carry out enormous systematic work of “telling China’s story” and creating, executing and supporting the technical arrangement and well-prepared manpower for it. All this functions in the well-defined and detailed ideological framework under a periodically updated set of instructions. As an example of the guidelines worked out for the China’s soft power engagements, I forward here some references to a recent (2020) ideological article, where “China’s story” has been broken down into four aspects.[[92]](#footnote-92)

First, “Party”, the role of which must always be in the centre of any “story” about China: “The core of telling ‘China’s story’ is the ‘story of the Chinese Communist Party, and the crux of telling the story of the Chinese Communist Party well is properly explaining why the CCP ‘can’.”

The point here is that the CPC must be portrayed as pre-eminently competent. This fits with the foreign and domestic propaganda we have seen from China this year, emphasizing the CPC’s leadership of the effort against COVID-19, and even the superiority of China’s political system in grappling with the crisis.

Second, “Dream”, i.e., the ideological guideline of the strategic narrative of “Chinese dream”, the “great rejuvenation of Chinese nation”: “Telling the Chinese dream well is about [conveying] the dream of national prosperity, national rejuvenation, and the happiness of the people, showing the essential content of the Chinese dream.”

For the foreign countries, this agenda is connected with the other narrative of “community of common destiny for mankind,” which means that China’s ascendance links it more deeply with the world in ways that benefit all. This is where the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investment and Chinese aid come into the picture, though these have naturally generated a great deal of opposition in recent years as “an unsettling extension of China’s rising power,” as clearly evidenced by ongoing US–China tensions and by the changing debate in Europe. For China, building a global media presence through the China Media Group and other players is about combatting such reservations and smoothing the way for Chinese engagement, as much as possible on China’s terms.

Third, “Culture”, highlights the importance of using “China’s excellent traditional culture” as a means to convey the “true,” the “good” and the “beautiful” of China in the world. Here we get the usual language about traditional culture as “China’s deepest source of cultural soft power”. China has used this agenda extensively during the last couple of decades sending art troupes and organizing Chinese cultural events (e.g., public celebration of the Chinese lunar New Year) worldwide. The Culture agenda, however, seems to be the weakest one among the Chinese soft power engagements, for the foreign audience is tired from such a show and has understood the main issues behind it, i.e., the attempts to improve China’s imago and make audience believe in its superiority.

Fourth, “Win-Win Cooperation”. Here again, the talk is about convincing the world that China’s rise is peaceful, and that its fundamental interest is to build a “community of common destiny for mankind” from which all countries and peoples can benefit. China’s tasks here are two-fold: to break through the “anti-Chinese politicians and media in the West,” and to showcase China as a successful model that can be admired, and perhaps emulated, by the world as it is put in the article: “Talking about the concept of a community of common destiny for mankind, we can set agendas around the solution for the global governance crisis, clarifying the practical and effective “Chinese solutions” that China today offers for world development, showing the world China’s wisdom as a major power and its [warm] feelings for the world.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

In China, the majority of its soft power engagements and appliances are strictly orchestrated by the party and the government through their special agencies and units. The CPC, by the way, has a supreme role in elaboration and controlling of relevant strategies and tactics leaving to the government offices the executing role, but the party also has its own instruments and networks it can apply. Special CPC agencies have been established to coordinate a wide range of soft power applications through PRC’s diplomatic representations, special envoys, and contact persons. The most important and powerful is the International Liaison Department of the CPC Central Committee (中国共产党中央委员会对外联络部 *zhōng guó gong chǎn dǎng zhōng yāng wěi yuan huì duì wài lián luò bù*) in charge of gathering intelligence on and influencing of foreign political parties, think tanks, and academics as well as finding ways to divide potential critics. For its universal activities of influence and coordinating efforts among communist and social-democratic parties worldwide, it is called a ‘New Comintern’ by some observers.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Under the guidance of the CPC and its International Liaison Department huge strategic planning efforts have been done and are underway to improve China’s image and reputation internationally as David Shambaugh concludes: “While China’s economic prowess impresses much of the world, its repressive political system and mercantilist business practices tarnish its reputation. And so, in an attempt to improve perceptions, Beijing has mounted a major public relations offensive in recent years, investing billions of dollars around the world in a variety of efforts.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

In Xi Jinping era, the issue has become even more vital for China as the processes in international politics are not developing in a favourable direction for China.

* 1. **Diplomacy and participation in international organisations**

In this area, China has demonstrated great potential, motivation, and ability in recent decades to increase its presence and say at every level. Thus, in terms of soft power engagement, this area is by far the domain where China’s success has been rather noteworthy. Diplomatic penetration and increasing domination in international organisations paired with impressive economic performance have made China one of the most authoritative players among the great powers and an attractive partner for most countries of the world, particularly among the developing countries or the “Third World” where China directs the lion’s share of its aid, loans, and infrastructural investments.

China has 161 embassies in foreign countries plus over 60 consulates, which is the largest number of foreign representations among all countries worldwide. Through such a wide diplomatic network, China has established a powerful system of not only presence but also monitoring, intervention and influence.

In the international organisations, in the UN agencies in particular, China has not only developed highly professional staff but also obtained leading positions in many of them that gives it the tool for managing these agencies and directing their activities in its own favour.

The growth of China’s power and capacities has made it into an increasingly self-confident and aggressive force which does not hide its aim to play the first violin in world politics and to orchestrate it in the way it considers favourable for itself. China employs all the means from soft power strategies or cooperation in culture and education to direct military threats (in the direction of Taiwan and on the South China Sea) ever more forcefully into the service of this objective. The most essential areas between them are economy and foreign trade, development of technological networks and control over them, and diplomacy. The latter includes China’s activity in international organisations, particularly in the UN and its structures and subdivisions, which has become increasingly powerful and assertive year by year.

An excellent methodological framework for assessment of China’s activity in international organisations is provided by the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission 2011 report by Stephen Olson and Clyde Prestowitz[[96]](#footnote-96) where the authors state: “China’s remarkable growth story and its strengthened relative position as result of the global financial crisis cannot help but deeply impact the make-up and functioning of the international institutions in which it participates, many of which have traditionally mirrored a US view of the world. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, China’s calls for greater representation in institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund became more vociferous, and other nations, including western developed nations, have seemed to signal a greater receptivity to this notion. The moral authority and credibility the Chinese can now carry into a variety of international economic institutions is greater than it ever has been.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

They set out ten trends and two truisms for understanding China’s activities in the international organizations that will be summarized below.[[98]](#footnote-98)

*Ten Trends*

1. Greater Assertiveness, Greater Maturity

This reflects China’s growing economic might, as the country has continued its historically unprecedented charge up the economic development ladder. This growing assertiveness can be measured on several levels: in its ability to shape policies and positions within organizations, in its ability to use these organizations as platforms to project both hard and soft power, and in its ability to promote national interests.

2. Expanding Influence

This growing influence is visible across a spectrum of issues, ranging from institutional culture within organizations to substantive issues of policy. “Influence” means that your interests and sensitivities have in effect become programmed onto the “hard drive” of others. And if we take this as a working definition of influence, we can say emphatically that Chinese influence in regional and international institutions has grown dramatically in recent years.

3. Broadening Sphere of Engagement

China has shown an increasing tendency to project itself into a much wider range of issues within organizations, no longer restricting its attention to issues of direct impact on China. It has demonstrated a greater proclivity to become involved in administrative, procedural, or other “organizational” issues within the institutions they participate in. As China broadens its engagement into issues such as these, it will have a greater ability to impact the way these institutions “look and feel” and operate.

4. Extreme Effectiveness

China has evolved into a highly effective player in the organizations reviewed. Both in terms of its ability to advance its own agenda, as well as its ability to deflect objectionable proposals from other quarters, China is a shrewd, savvy, and successful operator.

5. Content to Play a “Defensive Game” (in Some Organizations)

There are institutions (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation – APEC –, for example), in which China is an active participant not out of desire to proactively achieve particular objectives or to support the institutional mission, but rather to monitor the agenda and to deflect (when need be) proposals or initiatives that it finds objectionable. In this sense, activism and participation does not necessarily denote support, and, in fact, can sometimes signal the exact opposite. Within APEC, China can be content to play a defensive game on issues or agenda items which advance the APEC role on trade and investment, thereby “taking time off the clock”.

6. Greater Engagement: a Two-Way Street

As China becomes more integrated into the system of international institutions, there are some respects in which the policies and practices of the institution are able to impact – at least in small ways – the way China operates. International institutions have not and will not cause any bold or dramatic policy shifts in China, but some modest examples do exist of China moving towards practices which reflect the operating ethos of the organizations in which it participates.

7. An Impressive Ability to Learn

In several institutions, China has become the leading member nation in requesting and consuming studies and policy analysis on a range of issues. Although China has ministries full of capable staffers also conducting analysis on the same issues, China also sees the value in generating an independent viewpoint. This allows it to tap into, and profit from, the collective international expertise in these organizations. China also taps heavily into the institutional networks for information sharing, and exchanges of best practices and technical expertise on economic issues. Throughout all the institutions in which it participates, China has demonstrated an impressive ability to learn.

8. An Increasingly Valuable and Constructive Participant – in at Least Some Respects

China frequently and increasingly plays a constructive role within the institutions where it participates. It is thorough, exceedingly well-prepared and well organized about executing its responsibilities as an institutional member. China’s constructive engagement enhances its capability to influence these institutions.

9. Ambivalence

A core tenant of China’s political philosophy and foreign policy is the absolutely paramount supremacy of national sovereignty and the principle of non-involvement in the “internal affairs” of sovereign nations. China long ago reached a firm decision that it needs to be an active player in international institutions. But due to the contradictory impulses at the heart of its political philosophy, it will always approach its participation in these institutions with a certain degree of ambivalence.

10. The Primacy of Taiwan

China utilizes its participation in international institutions as well as its bilateral and regional relationships to relentlessly promote the sanctity of the “One China” policy.

*Two Truisms*

1. China’s Greatest Objective is STABILITY.

Chinese leaders need to ensure the existence of a benign and conducive global environment for China to continue to grow economically at a fast but sustainable pace – in short, to continue its “peaceful rise.” This is required in order to continue to propel the China growth story, maintain employment, provide the standard of living that is increasingly expected, and continue to maintain the CPC’s governing legitimacy. Thus, China’s role and objectives in international institutions is the need for stability – a stable global environment in which China can successfully pursue the very high growth rates.

2. International Organizations Do Not Create the Prevailing World Economic or Strategic Order – They Reflect the Prevailing World Order.

The world is changing. Institutions will either evolve to reflect the reality of the world in which they operate, or they will gradually drift toward irrelevance.

Within the past ten years, China’s footprint and influence in international organisations have vigorously grown, and Heritage Foundation researcher Brett D. Schaefer sums up the situation in the following words: “In short, China has shrewdly applied diplomatic and economic pressure to advance its interests, maximize its benefits, and minimize its costs under the current system. Looking back, it is hard not to conclude that since the mid- to late 2000s, China has been influencing the international system more than it is influencing China.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

The thought paper compiled for the *China Monitor* programme of the East-European think tank Warsaw Institute warns unambiguously: “As China’s economic and military power grows, further attempts to expand the scope of control in the system of international organizations, including the UN, the WTO and the IMF should be expected.”[[100]](#footnote-100)

Through its professional representatives, China has consistently contributed to achieving control and greater powers of decision in UN subdivisions and other international organisations. The US–China Economic and Security Review Commission report for the first half of 2021 “PRC Representation in International Organizations”[[101]](#footnote-101) presents the names and career histories of top officials elected from the People’s Republic of China. It turns out that the leaders of as many as four UN subdivisions out of fifteen are Chinese. Thus, there are more Chinese among the top leaders of UN structures than representatives of any other nationality. The representatives of the PRC are Secretary General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Secretary General of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Director General of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In the UN Secretariat, three senior officers are Chinese, and in 17 UN foundations, programmes and agencies as well as other 13 international organizations Chinese nationals occupy positions of senior staff. Through them, the representatives of the PRC (who often occupy high positions in the government structures of their country) have fairly good opportunities to influence the activities and decisions of UN subdivisions and other international organizations in the direction favourable for China.

There are numerous analyses and reports about such activities. For example, having the position of Assistant Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (which the representatives of the PRC have managed to keep since 2007), China has, under the label of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), channelled resources into the development and promotion of its Belt and Road Initiative. Likewise, under the guise of so-called deradicalization, with silent approval of the UN, it has conducted gross violations of human rights on discontented Muslim Uighurs in its Xinjiang autonomous region and has managed to get development aid for its dependent authoritarian regimes in Africa.[[102]](#footnote-102)

By now, the PRC has become one of the biggest financers of the UN, being second only to the United States in its proportion of financing. In 2019, the proportion of China’s financing amounted to 12% of the UN budget (in 2018, it was merely 7.9%). For comparison, the contribution of the US was 22% and of Japan, the next financer after China, 9.7%.

Special attention should be paid to China’s participation in UN peacekeeping missions in contributing to which it has also become a leading country. The white paper published in 2020 on the 30th anniversary of China’s participation in UN peacekeeping forces is a significant document that presents China’s success story in this area.[[103]](#footnote-103) China has become the second financial contributor to UN peacekeeping missions after the US and the first by the number of soldiers and missions, 40,000 persons in 25 countries respectively. Its constant rapid reaction forces amount to 8,000 men. China’s role is particularly remarkable in Africa.[[104]](#footnote-104) One the one hand, with its wide-scale participation, China creates the image of a responsible contributor to the global peace process, but observers are made cautious by the fact that China can gain invaluable training for its forces for applying them in internal conflicts if necessary. Secondly, China’s military presence in unstable regions (primarily in Africa again) where China has economic interests and is represented by its companies enables it to apply peacekeeping forces in these countries for protection of its national interests if problems occur.[[105]](#footnote-105)

In conclusion it can be said that the growth of unilateral domination of authoritarian China in the UN can be a tempting model for other emerging economies and beneficial for countries that are economically and politically dependent on China, but in its essence, it violates the ideals and objectives emphasised at the creation of the UN that it should be an equal global platform for all its members, and so it undermines the reliability and authority of the UN. The analysis referred to earlier sums up the problem as follows: “China’s attempts to make the UN a tool for achieving its hegemonic ambition would erode the institution’s trustworthiness from within and render international cooperation parochial. As a consequence, China’s approach to international cooperation would defeat the UN’s purpose to settle distributional conflicts since, very soon, other stakeholders would realize that cooperation is a cloak for advancing China’s national interests.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

Next, we are going to take a brief look at the activities of China in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and and its great influence on the growth and strengthening of China in the last 20 years.

China was admitted to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 as its 143rd member. The admission was preceded by 15 years of preparations and tense negotiations during which China had to bring its economy and foreign trade into conformity with the requirements of the WTO. Liberalisation of economy and diminishing the proportion of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s created conditions for the admission of China, although human rights issues in connection with economic freedom still remained topical. The key moment was showing the green light to China by the United States in 2000 during the presidency of generally China-friendly Bill Clinton. The reasons why both sides wished it and acted towards it have been summarised in the recent analysis of World101 portal: “China wanted to join the WTO because it would allow China access to new trading partners and better rates with current ones, raising prospects for improved living standards domestically and giving China a seat at the table in a globalizing world. The United States wanted something, too: for China to get on board with a U.S.-led, liberal-democratic order and move away from its communist model. But that's not quite what happened.”.[[107]](#footnote-107)

The PRC was admitted to the WTO as a non-market economy for 15 years. This status was revised in 2016–2017[[108]](#footnote-108) but has still remained problematic, as the scope of state intervention into setting of export prices is unclear.

During the first ten years as a WTO member, China’s economic and trade indicators grew several times: GDP approximately 5 times; manufacturing production over 4 times; foreign trade approximately 6 times; sales of services nearly 7 times, etc. Notable growth has also continued in the second second decade, by which China’s share and impact in the organisation has also grown. Among the 164 members of the WTO, China has become the second contributor to its budget (10.1% in 2019) after the US (11.6%).

China has undoubtedly gained in economy and people’s living standards, but the political changes that were expected when China opened to the world market have not materialised. Twenty years after China’s joining the WTO, it must be stated that greater economic growth has led to imposition of greater political control. The government has strengthened its control over the economy; the use of the Internet in China is extremely regulated and restricted.

* 1. **Education and Academic Cooperation[[109]](#footnote-109)**

Academic cooperation and exchange and mediation of knowledge between people and institutions is a perfectly natural phenomenon in the modern world. It involves all countries, with the larger and more developed ones mainly in the role of donors of knowledge and technologies, and the smaller and less developed ones as the recipients. In this context, nothing could be more natural than China’s growing participation in international research. Having become one of the leading economies, it would be impossible to exclude China from international academic cooperation.

However, other countries – and Western countries, in particular, – see cooperation with China as a growing problem and threat. The Western academic tradition is by nature an autonomous, independent network of universities and individuals free from any political interference and has been widely accepted as such by governments. The politicisation of academia and excessive state control have been considered inappropriate even from a pragmatic point of view, as it has long been clear that the quantity and quality of scientific information coming from a political and overregulated academy suffers as a result. Today, free academic activity and cooperation are protected by laws and international agreements.

The story is quite different in China where laws – in particular the 2017 National Intelligence Law – stipulate that all agencies and companies must cooperate with the country’s security and intelligence agencies, and this takes precedence over the staff of the relevant agencies. Article 7 of the PRC National Intelligence Law states: “Any organization or citizen shall support, assist and cooperate with the state intelligence work in accordance with the law, and keep the secrets of the national intelligence work known to the public.” The cooperation duties of organisations and individuals are detailed in Articles 10 to 15. [[110]](#footnote-110) The interests of the Chinese state are paramount in international academic cooperation. The rules and agreements of other countries are followed insofar as they do not conflict with China’s interests. If they do, they can and must be ignored, and every effort must be made to enforce China’s rules.

China’s nationally coordinated influence operation in the guise of academic cooperation can be broadly divided into three areas: direct scientific espionage; directing and influencing joint projects through financing and using the results in the interests of the Chinese state; the use of soft power, i.e., cultural and humanitarian education, to create attitudes and sentiment favourable to China.

Of these three, scientific espionage is the most widespread and the most damaging to the target countries. It includes the theft of scientific and technological information, bribery of researchers, disguised financing of projects that benefit China and plagiarism of Western research results. This is the most difficult to control, as Western universities and research institutions are generally open and background checks on all Chinese researchers and students are neither possible nor effective. However, in recent years, a number of cases have been uncovered in the United States and Australia where the problem is most acute. In several cases, it has been ascertained that academics caught in espionage worked directly under the PRC’s intelligence or military structures, so that the main purpose of their work was espionage. The counter-intelligence services of these countries are heavily involved in gathering information and setting up measures, while scientific espionage by the PRC is actually expanding.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation’s comprehensive report “China: The Risk to Academia”, for example, analyses the forms and strategic goals of the PRC’s scientific espionage in detail, with plenty of examples. The report claims that, as a result, the US suffers annual losses in the range of $225 to $600 billion.[[111]](#footnote-111)

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) database, “The Chinese Defence Universities Tracker” contains data on over 150 Chinese universities that directly fulfil orders for the PRC’s military-industrial complex and cooperation with which is particularly risky in terms of security. Among these, there are a number of “ordinary” universities. The report begins with a cautionary statement: “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is building links between China’s civilian universities, military and security agencies. Those efforts, carried out under a policy of leveraging the civilian sector to maximise military power (known as ‘military-civil fusion’), have accelerated in the past decade.”[[112]](#footnote-112)

Financing from China, both direct and covert, is often linked to the previous point, as it opens up good opportunities for Chinese researchers to participate in direct research and access data and results. Researchers from target countries are also recruited to work for China, as has recently been the case in American universities.[[113]](#footnote-113) Universities in poorer countries, such as Estonia and elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe, are more vulnerable to influence through funding, as their own national financing is often insufficient.[[114]](#footnote-114) The potential risks of Chinese-funded joint projects are often not analysed, while censorship and concealment and influencing public opinion may be used to obtain funding. A special form of influencing through financing is the funding of academic activities (conferences, lecture courses, etc.) promoting Chinese activities through PRC embassies or undercover agents. Typical was the recent case of the Czech-Chinese Centre at Charles University in Prague, which led to its closure.[[115]](#footnote-115)

The most important and widespread instrument of China’s soft power is the Confucius Institute network, through which the Chinese language and culture are taught in collaboration between universities in the PRC and in the target countries, mainly with Chinese funding and teaching staff. Curated by the PRC Ministry of Education, this network includes about 450 Confucius Institutes worldwide; a total of 37 are in the Eastern and Central European countries belonging to the 16+1 cooperation network, including one in Estonia that has been operating at Tallinn University since 2010.[[116]](#footnote-116) Their main activities could be considered worthy of merit, if it were not for the numerous cases where Confucius Institutes have tried to interfere in the academic activities of universities in target countries by demanding that they follow Chinese standards in presenting Chinese issues, etc. As a rule, the Confucius Institutes act as extensions of PRC embassies. In addition, other international networks are run and funded by China to promote so-called traditional Chinese values and to justify PRC’s political practices. One example is the International Confucian Association.[[117]](#footnote-117)

* 1. **Western “China Hands” as the China’s soft power agents**

Chinese leaders have been smart and skilful in successfully employing prominent Westerners for creating a positive image of China abroad, which, in turn, has impacted Western policy makers to submit policies that are favourable to China and facilitate the growth of its influence. Even in the periods of relative economic and military weakness, Communist China has been successful in finding enthusiastic admirers ready to wholeheartedly praise China’s achievements and exclusive and progressive role among other countries. Three representative examples will be given below.

Historically, the first successful soft power campaign of the kind by Chinese communists took place already more than a decade before their rising to power and establishing the People’s Republic of China. The term ‘soft power’, of course, was not used that time, but, essentially, it was a classic example how it works. It was the case of the American journalist Edgar Snow whose 1937 book *Red Star Over China* caused a breakthrough in the West’s stand towards the communist movement in China. Having spent months in the communists’ base in the village of Bao’an, North China, and met and interviewed Mao Zedong and other communist leaders, he created a very positive story about the communist movement in China that, for decades, appealed and influenced the West’s ideas and public opinion. The book survived many editions in the West but also in China, thus providing inspiration for the Chinese as well. Snow himself wrote in the preface to the 1968 edition: “It provided not only for non-Chinese readers, but also for the entire Chinese people – including all but the Communist leaders themselves – the first authentic account of the Chinese Communist Party and the first connected story of their long struggle to carry through the most thoroughgoing social revolution in China's three millenniums of history.”

This story and the “story of the story” is still used and amplified by the Chinese propaganda machine as we see in a recent article of the CCP English mouthpiece *Global Time*s which tells us: “After over 100 days in Shaanbei, Snow found the answer he had been looking for. He was fascinated by this unique charm of the East, something he believed representing the light of rejuvenation for the ancient nation of China. For him, the Communists were the most outstanding men and women he had met in China in the past decade with the “military discipline, political morale, and the will to victory”, and “for sheer dogged endurance, and ability to stand hardship without complaint”, they were “unbeatable”. He recalled his four-month time with the Red Army as a most inspiring experience, during which he had met with the most free and happy Chinese he’d ever known. In these people who devoted themselves to what they believed was the right and just cause, Snow felt a vibrant hope, passion and the unbeatable strength of mankind, something he had never felt again ever since.”[[118]](#footnote-118)

A more recent case is John and Doris Naisbitt’s 2010 book *China’s Megatrends*[[119]](#footnote-119) advertised as ‘A groundbreaking look at a new socio-political model on the rise’, where the authors – prominent China experts – picture a very optimistic scenario for China’s development. Initially, the idea of such a book was suggested by nobody else as the CPC’s General Secretary and Chairman of the PRC Jiang Zemin himself, as the authors reveal in the preface. Finally, it was completed and supported by the order of a Chinese business leader. As a result, a great eulogy of the post-reform Chinese model and its idealized social order, labelled as ‘vertical democracy’ by the authors, was created that, again, has had great influence in both China and the West shaping an admiring uncritical attitude among the politicians and businesspeople of the latter.

The most influential dignitary who contributed to making China what it is now was undoubtedly the legendary political guru Henry Kissinger. His secret diplomacy and considerable influence on President Nixon in the early 1970s gave Communist China access to the world politics and opened doors to the international relations system and market economy despite its own autocratic Leninist political build-up with CPC’s absolute power that has not changed during the half-century period of engagement. Kissinger himself was seemingly carried away by the steadfast belief in China’s exclusiveness and ability to change. Therefore, in his 2011 book, he affirmed again: “China does not see itself as a rising, but returning power… It does not view the prospect of a strong China exercising influence in economic, cultural, political, and military affairs as an unnatural challenge to world order – but rather as a return to a normal state of affairs.”[[120]](#footnote-120)

All three are brilliant examples how the Chinese soft power works. All the “stories” echo the great narratives of China described above in Chapter 2, especially the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” narrative. The latter largely bases on the historical myth of China’s ancient greatness and superiority, as explained. Many Western authors – the mentioned three among them – take it uncritically as a true story and build up an idealistic picture of China’s exclusive role in creating the new world order and solving the accumulated problems. In the Western minds, such pro-China attitude is mixed with belief that Western democracies are unable to solve these problems and the liberal world order is timed out. The new power is needed, and they are in faith that this must be China, which they see as the inheritor of great culture and Confucian humanistic tradition. The latter, if received and adopted, might save the world and humankind. China’s success in economic performance has been seen as the proof of its capability to go on and take the responsibility for reshaping of the global community. The actual autocratic and completely anti-humanistic realpolitik and mode of administration is largely ignored.

China, in turn, applies such Western narratives in favour of itself in manifold ways. First, learning from them and applying them to create and replenish its own narratives. Second, referring to them internally to convince the domestic public how prominent Western minds have already understood China’s importance, its exclusive messianic role and responsibility to (re)take the leading position in the world. Third, to reflect them back to the West through education and cultural programmes and campaigns in order to assure that Chinese and Western progressive minds are already going on hand in hand, and politicians and the common public have only to learn from them and join China’s march in creating a new world by applying Chinese solutions.

I would like to conclude this section referring to another influential theory currently very popular among students and scholars of Chinese thought – the theory of Confucian role ethics proposed by the tandem of American academic sinologists Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger T. Ames in the early 2000s.[[121]](#footnote-121) With the role the ethics theory, the two prominent and authoritative scholars in early Chinese thought, authors of many scholarly works and translations of Chinese classical texts, starting with the recognition of the moral crisis of contemporary world, elaborate the narrative of supremacy of Chinese (Confucian) collectivism compared with Western individualism. The authors ask the question whether cultural and moral change should follow China’s rise in economic means? How could China contribute to the ethical change of humankind? Their answer seems to be affirmative: yes, China can do it and it will be China’s greatest contribution to building the new world order. Let them introduce the new approach by themselves: “It is indisputable that there is much wrong with the world today. Many people of good will think the problems are basically political and economic, but both of us believe that the politics and economics are embedded in a conceptual framework of moralities grounded in one type of foundational individualism or another, none of which are even capable of addressing those problems any longer, much less contribute to their solutions. Thus, we believe that new moralities are needed (containing some very old elements), with intellectual and psychological resources that more closely resemble the hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations of actual people than the deracinated individuals who currently populate our patterns of moral thinking. For us, a role ethics largely inspired by the canons of classical Confucian philosophy, suitably modified for our modern sensibilities, presents one such conceptual framework for grounding a morality appropriate for the present day. And more than that, such a role ethic can appeal to what are referred to as liberals and conservatives alike, with room as well for both the faithful and the skeptics, proffering as it does a vision of the good life for human beings that can provide useful guidelines for addressing our political, economic, environmental – and perhaps even spiritual – problems, in a more cooperative manner, without any necessary theological grounding.”[[122]](#footnote-122)

Not doubting at all the good faith of authors and their academic followers, their profound knowledge in Chinese culture, and willingness to contribute to building a new ethics for humankind, I still cannot avoid to notice that this noble theory is also included into the China’s soft power machinery, especially to support the “Building a community of shared future for mankind” narrative that has been one of the headlines of Xi Jinping’s ideology. Chinese leadership makes great efforts to present itself as a promotor of Confucian values which, in their version, are not in controversy with the Chinese authoritative model of rule. The question, however, remains whether these two are reconcilable.

**Conclusions**

If we want to assess China’s influence and its extent in today’s world, we firstly need to know and see through its strategic narratives, the stories the Chinese leadership employing an army of academicians, officials, diplomats, and technical workers delivers and tries to make the rest of the world believe them. Through these narratives, China is creating the information environment where a battle is going on between the stories of different nations and alliances, and, finally, the balance of power of rivalling nations and political systems is forming. China’s current leadership definitely does not play on balance but its own domination in both this information environment and the real world.

In the recent decades, China has been quite successful in spreading and imposition of its narratives. On the one hand, this has become possible due to the economic and welfare model of the West that is oriented to the growth and increase of profit. To keep this model running, new markets and manufacturing bases must permanently be taken into exploitation for which China has provided a lot of opportunities since the 19th century and explosively in the recent decades. At the same time, the West’s hunt for profit has also given China many opportunities through Western interests and investments that have triggered rapid growth and made it possible for China to develop itself into a leading nation of the world during less than a couple of generations who do not follow the rules set by the West but feels assertive enough to set their own new rules.

China’s rapid growth and more and more forcible imposition of its authoritarian model of rule paired with unfolding global crises has made West awake and perceive the fact that China, nurtured and encouraged by the West itself, has gathered strength and become a threat for the current system of international relations and world order based on conventional rules and equal cooperation.

On the other hand, the reliability and adoptability of Chinese narratives is greatly supported by the Western academic orientalist discourse which, in the research and interpretation of Chinese ancient cultural heritage in general and the Confucian tradition in particular, followed the belief in the exceptionalism and superiority of the Chinese civilization and even political system compared to the West, which was formed during the Enlightenment. Politicians, traders, and investors of the later times took it *bone fide* to find justification for earning profit and ignoring China’s authoritative political system with its brutal and inhuman methods of rule. This was so up to the very recent years.

Third, the Chinese elite and strategists have wisely and skilfully exploited such a positive receptive imagination of China’s cultural past and the profit-oriented attitude of the West while building up its country’s economy using Western investments and technologies. Having become strong enough, China has extensively launched its politics to gaining dominance in the world affairs and oust the Western alliance headed by the US from its leading position. Simultaneously, using its technical advantage and virtually unlimited manpower, China is intensifying its soft power engagements, especially information warfare on the internet, including disinformation campaigns and enforcement of fake news produced by itself. This area, however, has remained outside of the scope of this report.

Despite growing technical capability and assertiveness in international politics and international organisations, some setbacks in China’s largely successful soft power engagements can be seen in the very recent years. On the one hand, one reason is the rising sense of threat from China in the West and also Asian countries, and better information about China’s narratives. On the other hand, however, China’s more aggressive and exploitative economic policy, for example, investments made in the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, is leading the receiving countries into long-term debts and dependence. Extensive academic espionage and theft of academic propriety also belong among China’s commonplace practices that do not increase its attractiveness as a reliable partner. Unreliability of China’s positive narratives has also become evident due to its increasingly brutal internal and external policies, including violence and abusing human rights, and more complete information available about these practices worldwide.

All these developments have caused some decrease in China’s popularity and attractiveness in recent years despite its enormous efforts to achieve the opposite result. This is seen, for example, in the soft power rankings. In the Soft Power 30 ratings for the year of 2019, China is only on the 27th position falling far behind of leading and even minor Western countries as well as some Asian countries, such as Japan (8), South Korea (19), and Singapur (21).[[123]](#footnote-123)

As a final conclusion, we should still not underestimate China’s capability and inventiveness in the current information warfare as well as in updating and spreading its strategic narratives by the means of several soft power engagements. As said above, China has virtually unlimited resources to do it, and what is increasingly important, China is simultaneously rapidly increasing its hard power capabilities, the military power in particular. To resist China’s challenges, we have to increase our in-depth knowledge and information concerning China’s activities, enhance our own soft power engagements and, in cooperation of the entire Western alliance, develop hard power measures to react if the situation requires it. We have to do everything to demonstrate to the Chinese leadership that the confrontation with the West has by far not been resolved in the favour of China yet.

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