



## China's 'Natural Return' to the Center – Beijing's Perspective on Strategic Competition, Drivers, and Alternative Models for World Order

*May-Britt U. Stumbaum*<sup>1,2</sup> and *Sharon De Cet*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies,*  
<http://www.marshallcenter.org>

<sup>2</sup> *The SPEAR Institute,* <https://spear-institute.com/>

**Abstract:** The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees the growing role and influence of the People's Republic of China as a return to the natural state of affairs. Building on ancient concepts like *Tian Xia* and driven by historically shaped preferences for control and dominance, the CCP proposes a “community of shared future for mankind” as an alternative to the Western-shaped rules-based order – a China-centric, hierarchical world order with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states to the “benefit of all.” This article introduces Beijing's perception of strategic competition, its main interests and drivers, and the avenues it pursues to promote its alternative world order.

**Keywords:** Tian Xia, New World Order, Chinese Communist Party, CCP, strategic competition, Global South, Xi Jinping

### Introduction

While Western powers may view China's rise with anxiety, and at times with amazement, China perceives its growing prominence on the global stage as a return to the natural state of affairs. In the view of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—which governs the People's Republic as a one-party-state with authoritarian characteristics—the U.S.-China competition since the Cold War has primarily been over regional order in the Asia-Pacific, and more recently, over the global order. The impact of the Trump Administration, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, a perceived withdrawal of the United States from the Indo-Pacific arena, alongside allegations of U.S. isolationism from the international stage,

have been portrayed by Chinese president Xi as making the twenty-first century a “period of historical opportunity”<sup>1</sup> for China’s rise. With the People’s Republic of China (PRC) having reached significant economic and military power status, U.S.–China competition has now extended beyond the Asia Pacific region, spurring into a contest for a new world order.

China does not intend simply to replace the United States as the hegemonic power. The CCP’s ambition is to remold both the Chinese nation and the world through ideological, political, economic, and military means, all integrated into a single, centrally steered grand strategy. Recent geopolitical events and China’s rapid ascension as a global power often make it challenging for the West to explain China’s behavior and inscribe it into a simple geopolitical narrative. Nevertheless, many Western countries still interpret China’s foreign policy—and shape their own China strategies—within the framework of traditional international relations theory.

The mismatch between China’s pattern of growth, its behavior, and the expectations of other global powers has inevitably made Beijing the focus of an international debate about the current global order, where China has been repeatedly confronted regarding its views on international relations and the existing *status quo*. This debate has been accompanied by fears and doubts about Beijing’s intentions and ambitions, with China often challenged to explain its positions, though with limited success.

The implications of the Chinese vision of world order remain unclear. Some countries have called Xi Jinping’s world vision “unacceptable,”<sup>2</sup> and Beijing’s initiatives—such as the Belt and Road, the Global Security Initiative, and the “12-point peace proposal”<sup>3</sup> presented on the anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—are largely viewed with suspicion by the United States and its major allies. However, according to Chinese sources, countries of the so-called “Global South” appear to be more receptive. The China Institute of International Studies and the Chinese Center for Global Security Initiative Studies released a report claiming that more than 100 countries, as well as various international and regional organizations, have provided support for and appreciation of China’s

---

<sup>1</sup> “Speech by Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Seminar on ‘Learning and Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Party,’” *Xinhua*, January 11, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/11/c\\_1126970918.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/11/c_1126970918.htm). - in Chinese

<sup>2</sup> Comment by U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in an address outlining the Administration’s policy toward the People’s Republic of China: Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” Speech, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, “What Is China’s Peace Proposal for Ukraine War?” *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2023, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/what-is-chinas-peace-proposal-for-ukraine-war/>.

Global Security Initiative (GSI).<sup>4</sup> According to the Chinese government, more than 80 countries support also its Global Civilization Initiative.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its rise to a global leadership position, China asserts that it is not an imperialist power and has no hegemonic intentions. Xi Jinping defends the Chinese world vision as one of a “community of shared future for mankind,” a phrase more directly translated from Chinese as “a common destiny for mankind.” This slogan, first introduced by former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, has been frequently cited by current General Secretary Xi Jinping, to the extent that it was incorporated into the preamble of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China during its 2018 amendment.<sup>6</sup>

The question then arises: How can China’s expanding international influence and its global competition with the United States be reconciled with its assertion of non-hegemonic intentions? One possible explanation lies in China’s concept of world order, which integrates statecraft, nation-to-nation relations, and global governance under the same guiding principle, known as *Tian Xia* 天下, “everything under heaven.”<sup>7</sup> In a rough sense, *Tian Xia* envisions China as the benign hegemon at the center, surrounded by tributary states. In this paradigm, borders transcend, and the world is seen as a unified sphere with China at its center. “China in the old days had no concept of a well-defined boundary. A marker stone would be used to define a region, not a border.”<sup>8</sup> In contemporary discussions of *Tian Xia*, the PRC’s “re-emergence” as a great power is viewed as an opportunity to reshape the Western-centric international system with a system that is perceived as superior to the United Nations framework, which is often characterized as a political marketplace focused on parochial national interests.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, “China Releases Report on Implementation of Global Security Initiative,” The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, July 19, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/19/content\\_WS669999e74c6d0868f4e8e93eb.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/19/content_WS669999e74c6d0868f4e8e93eb.html).

<sup>5</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, “Initiatives Proposed by China, Fruitful Outcomes Shared by World,” May 22, 2023, accessed July 29, 2024, [http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtdt/202305/t20230522\\_11081047.htm](http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtdt/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm).

<sup>6</sup> “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, preamble,” updated November 20, 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content\\_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html).

<sup>7</sup> Literally meaning “all under heaven,” *Tian Xia* (天下) refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical boundaries. Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Duke University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372448>.

<sup>8</sup> Shiu Sin Por, “Tianxia: China’s Concept of International Order,” *Global Asia* 15, no. 2 (June 2020): 44-50, [https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order\\_shiu-sin-por](https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order_shiu-sin-por).

<sup>9</sup> Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 120-121.

This article will attempt to describe how Beijing views the world and how working processes and concepts like *Tian Xia* are shaping a vision for a global order that challenges the existing system, grounded on liberal and democratic principles.

## Beijing's Perspective

The overarching goal of China's statecraft, as envisioned under *Tian Xia*, is to reshape global relations into a China-centric, hierarchical world order with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states. To illustrate this concept, we can draw parallels to Xi Jinping's 2017 speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva, where he referred to the China-led world order as a "community,"<sup>10</sup> invoking the Latin motto *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno* – "One for all, all for one."

While Xi Jinping did not explicitly mention the Chinese worldview *Tian Xia* in that speech, it is intriguing to note that the phrase is often employed in monotheistic contexts. In religious settings, the emphasis is on the existence of a single god, whereas under *Tian Xia*, China's interactions with the outside world are rooted in the monistic assertion of the CCP as the exclusive and indivisible core of the nation-state. This monistic concept traces back to imperial times when the emperor—much like the CCP today—held the sole claim to truth. Xi Jinping openly seeks to position himself as the contemporary custodian of China's traditions. If *Tian Xia* represents China's understanding of the world, Xi Jinping can be likened to the "Son of Heaven," overseeing temporal power, or *Tian Chao*.<sup>11</sup>

The party's adherence to this orthodoxy gained momentum after the 20th Congress of the CCP when Xi Jinping underscored the importance of preserving the "great founding spirit of the Party and the spirit of Yan'an." Xi's deliberate choice to pay homage to the Revolution Shrine in Yan'an, where Mao Zedong asserted ideological supremacy, signals a centralized and personalized approach to power. This metaphor also recalls an era when the CCP was entrenched in a challenging civil war, possibly reflecting Beijing's perception of the current geopolitical landscape as hostile. This perception was underscored in Xi's speech at

---

<sup>10</sup> As Steve Tsang points out, "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" is a propaganda slogan from the CCP, while the direct translation would equal "common destiny of mankind," indicating it is—in their view—inevitable and not something up for discussion. See CSIS China Power Project Podcast, "The Political Thought of Xi Jinping: A Conversation with Dr. Steve Tsang," *China Power*, March 28, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/podcasts/the-political-thought-of-xi-jinping/>.

<sup>11</sup> Literally meaning "heavenly empire," the *Tian Chao* (天朝) concept has been extremely significant in fostering Chinese nationalism and support for the Emperor, painted as the "Son of Heaven." From Arthur Cotterell, *The Imperial Capitals of China: An Inside View of the Celestial Empire* (Random House, 2011). Also see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "China's Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies," *China Monitor*, Mercator Institute for China Studies, July 18, 2018, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>.

the 20th National People's Congress in 2022, where he framed the U.S.-led liberal world order as a major impediment to Beijing's "heavenly mandate."

The recollection of historical conflicts plays a pivotal role in China's nation-building and the CCP's self-legitimization, control, and strategic positioning globally.<sup>12</sup> According to Beijing, three significant losses since the 19th century continue to influence its statecraft. The first loss was territorial, resulting from the Sino-Japanese War, during which Japan gained control of Taiwan and other Chinese territories. The second loss pertains to international standing and dignity, stemming from the Opium Wars, which, according to Xi Jinping, reduced China to a "semi-colonial, semi-feudal society" through "unequal treaties." These treaties restricted China's access to new technologies, contributing to a technological gap with the West – a factor Beijing considers crucial to its subsequent decline. The third loss refers to the loss of political control due to foreign interference, leading to the civil war of 1945-1949. This conflict ultimately ended the "Century of Humiliation" with the establishment of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong.

These historical losses profoundly shape China's worldview, prompting the CCP to seek greater autonomy, self-sufficiency, and a more assertive foreign policy. For over two centuries, these losses have driven Beijing to pursue three main priorities relentlessly: domestic prosperity and control, international stability, and technological leadership.

Linking China's loss-driven mindset to its contemporary vision of world order, it is evident that China's pursuit of autarchy under *Tian Xia* is not merely a strategy to legitimize the CCP's domestic leadership but an endeavor to shape a new global governance model aligned with Chinese values and interests. As a monistic political system, China does not seamlessly interact with pluralistic political systems in the U.S.-led world order. Consequently, China strives to establish a hierarchical world order, positioning itself at the apex, driven by the goal of self-preservation.<sup>13</sup>

## Strategic Competition

It is crucial to emphasize that, from the standpoint of the CCP, the ongoing strategic rivalry with the United States is not merely perceived as a clash of interests; rather, it is viewed as a means to secure and uphold China's sovereignty and territorial integrity— and, by extension, control over all matters pertaining to China—while simultaneously restoring its global prestige and dignity. Consequently, China positions itself as a foundational element in a novel world order characterized by distinct Chinese attributes. In this framework, Beijing does not perceive itself as a growing power ready to challenge the *status quo* but rather

---

<sup>12</sup> Vincent K.L. Chang, "China's New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation," *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May 2022): 1053-1069, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia021>.

<sup>13</sup> Tatlow, "China's Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies."

as a “potent force for peace.”<sup>14</sup> In engaging in competition with the United States, China aims to foster partnerships and alliances to establish its envisioned “heavenly empire,” distinct from being seen as an “honorary member of the West.”<sup>15</sup>

As its inaugural act on the global stage, Beijing seized the global focus on the Olympic Games on February 4, 2022, to present its concept of a “multipolar world order.” By formally announcing its “no limits partnership” with Russia, China began shaping the international order to align with CCP interests. This vision is intended to be shared with strategic regional allies, such as Russia, which is considered a valuable partner in countering U.S. influence in the region. Since then, both nations have supported each other in confrontations with the West over Ukraine and Taiwan. They have pledged to intensify collaboration in pushing back U.S.-aligned regional actors and implementing a “regionalization” of both economy and security in the Indo-Pacific. However, despite the two countries doubling down on their alliance this year, the commercial relationship between Beijing and Moscow remains quite complex. The possibility of U.S. and EU sanctions on Chinese businesses that may allow Russia to obtain technologies<sup>16</sup> required for its weapons represents a real limit to the China-Russia partnership, highlighting how the relationship between Moscow and Beijing remains heavily troubled and dependent on Beijing’s economic prosperity.

### ***Promoting Domestic Prosperity through Regional Economic Stability ...***

China employs economic and diplomatic connections as pivotal instruments in the ongoing strategic competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. This area is strategically important to Beijing, serving as a contingency network to counter potential U.S.-led attempts to decouple China from global supply chains. Xi Jinping’s vision of an “Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future” outlines an alternative hub-and-spokes model, where China is positioned as the central hub connecting individual nations in a distributed supply chain network.

From Beijing’s perspective, this model serves both China’s domestic prosperity and its foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. Domestically, Xi

---

<sup>14</sup> Qin Gang, Chinese Ambassador to the United States, “How China Sees the World,” *The National Interest*, December 26, 2022, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-sees-world-206058>.

<sup>15</sup> Quote by Former Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, reported in Graham Allison and Robert Blackwill, “Interview: Lee Kuan Yew on the Future of U.S.-China Relations,” Book excerpt, *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2013, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/interview-lee-kuan-yew-on-the-future-of-us-china-relations/273657/>.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa O’Carroll, “EU Proposes Sanctions on Chinese Firms Aiding Russian War Effort,” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/14/eu-proposes-sanctions-on-chinese-firms-aiding-russian-war-effort>.

Jinping introduced the concept of “dual circulation”<sup>17</sup> to ensure China’s development and attain “common prosperity.” Incorporating the dual circulation concept into the CCP’s constitution underscores that combating hostile U.S. efforts—such as those aimed at limiting China’s access to high technology and products—is not only the CCP’s *raison d’être* but also China’s *raison d’État*.

Amid trade tensions between the United States and China, this vision supports and upholds the “dual circulation” model for China’s national prosperity and fosters a robust economic partnership between Beijing and Indo-Pacific countries. China has remained ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009, and since 2020, ASEAN has become China’s largest trading partner for three consecutive years.<sup>18</sup>

### ***... and Contributing to International Development While Ensuring Domestic Economic Independence and Extending Influence***

By adopting a growth model centered on the national market while facilitating interaction between domestic and foreign regional markets, Xi Jinping aims to reduce China’s dependence on U.S. markets and technology. This strategy seeks to create a more resilient, prosperous, and sustainable economy that will not be “strangled by foreign countries.”<sup>19</sup> A thriving domestic economy will, in turn, legitimize China as a leading member of the “big family of developing countries,” helping shape a new international order aligned with CCP interests and ensuring the survival of the CCP.

An example of how China uses the “Global South” as an arena for strategic competition is the recent enlargement of BRICS, which now includes Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Three of these six countries are major oil producers, suggesting how BRICS has become another platform for Beijing to advance a CCP-centric narrative. At the recent summit in Johannesburg, the group called for reform of Bretton Woods institutions, “including a greater role for emerging markets and developing countries.” While BRICS still faces internal misalignments, the organization clearly serves as a channel to promote China’s vision of the world order, with the goal of redesigning perceived “pro-Western” institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to better align with Chinese interests.

---

<sup>17</sup> Alicia García Herrero, “What Is Behind China’s Dual Circulation Strategy,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 69 (Fall 2021), <https://www.prclleader.org/post/what-is-behind-china-s-dual-circulation-strategy>.

<sup>18</sup> See the “Chairman’s Statement of the 26th ASEAN-China Summit,” Jakarta, Indonesia, September 6, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-26th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Tang, “Xi Jinping Says China Must Quicken Pace of Tech Self-reliance to Prevent Being ‘Strangled by Foreign Countries,’” *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2023, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3208882/xi-jinping-says-china-must-quicken-pace-tech-self-reliance-prevent-being-strangled-foreign-countries>.

## ***China's Pursuit of "Comprehensive National Security" in the New World Order***

To achieve its dual objectives of regime preservation and international development, the CCP must secure and control strategic assets while fostering a stable international environment. In pursuit of these goals, China adopts a "whole-of-society approach,"<sup>20</sup> involving all branches of government, the military, private companies, organizations, and the diaspora. Over time, the concept of security in CCP ideology has expanded beyond Mao's political, territorial, and military focus to include broader aspects such as food, space, society, and the environment – all encompassed under a "security paradigm." Xi Jinping refers to this exhaustive approach as "comprehensive national security," a concept that traces its roots back to the PRC's founding in 1949. Given the borderless nature of *Tian Xia*, the concept intertwines party, national, and international security. This operational strategy has required Beijing to bridge civilian and military sectors, breaking traditional silos, sharing expertise, centrally funding dual-use technology, and undertaking research and development initiatives to harness science and innovation for strategic objectives, including enhancing military capabilities and promoting economic development.

### ***At the Core: Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific and Southern Pacific***

In pursuit of these goals, the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the Pacific Islands, emerges as a critical investment zone for both Washington and Beijing. The United States has historically been a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific, maintaining a significant military presence. In the post-war period, it established the foundation of the regional security structure through ironclad treaty alliances, promoting a democratic and liberal model of growth with countries such as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Given that the U.S.-led model for the Indo-Pacific does not align with Beijing's perspective on world order, it is unsurprising that China strategically employs diplomatic influence—primarily through security agreements and targeted investments—to gain access to vital strategic assets, particularly dual-use infrastructures.

In the Pacific Islands, China's political and diplomatic maneuvers against the United States go beyond the islands' interests, advancing Beijing's agenda by granting access to geostrategic hotspots and potentially enhancing China's role as a security actor. Ideologically, China also cultivates regional allies who may

---

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive analysis refer to Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda, "Comprehensive National Security' Unleashed: How Xi's Approach Shapes China's Policies at Home and Abroad," *China Monitor*, MERICS, September 15, 2022, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/comprehensive-national-security-unleashed-how-xis-approach-shapes-chinas-policies-home-and>.



support its claims over Taiwan in exchange for economic and security partnerships.<sup>21</sup> However, Beijing's push for the regionalization of security under Chinese guidance, framed around the narrative of the Asia-Pacific as "no one's backyard,"<sup>22</sup> appears to have encountered challenges. Last May, the Pacific Islands declined China's offer of a comprehensive trade and security deal.

While U.S.-China relations had been on a downward spiral in recent years, fueled by a sense of pessimism stemming from the trade war, growing technology competition, the Taiwan Strait crisis, and contrasting approaches to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping last November marked the zenith of a year-long process that helped calm tensions. This was due to several factors contributing to the "reset" of competition. For China, these factors included reduced financial engagements in the Pacific, which were linked to post-COVID recovery, coupled with increased U.S. credibility in providing defensive support to Taiwan and its allies. This credibility has been bolstered through the development of the Quad, AUKUS, and improved bilateral relations with countries around China's periphery. These elements will represent a setback for Beijing's strategy, likely prompting it to continue focusing its diplomatic and financial efforts on initiatives that yield greater influence at lower costs while concentrating on geostrategic hotspots that align with China's domestic goals.

### ***Addressing the Void: China's Economic Opening***

While some nations in the Indo-Pacific region still perceive a rising authoritarian China as a security concern, Beijing's economic influence remains strong across several countries. This is especially evident following then-President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and President Biden's limited efforts to provide a mechanism for Asia-Pacific economies to access the U.S. market. In this vacuum, China has positioned itself as the leader of the Asia-Pacific economic bloc, solidified through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Meanwhile, the Biden administration has shown little interest in joining the rebranded Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or

---

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Beijing's 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands. More recently, after DPP's victory in Taiwan's presidential elections, Beijing also resumed ties with Nauru. Paul Millar, "China's Pacific Charm Offensive Pays off as Nauru Drops Taipei for Beijing," *France 24*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20240116-china-s-pacific-charm-offensive-pays-off-as-nauru-drops-taipei-for-beijing>.

<sup>22</sup> "President Xi Jinping Delivered a Written Speech at the APEC CEO Summit, Underscoring China's Commitment to Building an Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, November 17, 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesgityjtjhtg/202211/t20221117\\_10977274.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesgityjtjhtg/202211/t20221117_10977274.html); "Xi Urges Efforts to Carry Forward Great Founding Spirit of CPC and Yan'an Spirit," *Xinhua*, October 29, 2022, accessed February 27, 2023, [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/29/content\\_WS635c022ac6d0a757729e1e5a.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/29/content_WS635c022ac6d0a757729e1e5a.html).

offering market access under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF).<sup>23</sup>

China's economic "opening up" plays a crucial role in navigating its strategic competition with the United States, as former Vice Premier Liu He highlighted during his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He emphasized that "opening up to the world is a must, not an expediency,"<sup>24</sup> underscoring China's commitment to opposing unilateralism and protectionism while promoting international cooperation. In this context, Beijing engaged in consultations with Australia, a key player in the Indo-Pacific and a close U.S. ally, leading to the resumption of coal shipments from Australia to China after nearly two years. This move reflects the importance of Canberra in China's pursuit of strategic leadership in the Indo-Pacific, as favorable relations with Australia are seen as crucial for advancing China's application to join the CPTPP and strengthening economic ties in the Asia-Pacific. China recognizes that its improved ties with Canberra present a significant opportunity for enhancing the China-Australia economic and trade relationship.

Just as domestic prosperity solidifies the CCP's legitimacy, robust international economic ties are essential to securing China's envisioned world order. In the Indo-Pacific, the CCP's objectives are closely linked to Beijing's broader ambitions of positioning China as a global military, economic, and normative power.

### ***Leveraging the United Front Work Department and More***

The United Front Work Department (UNFWD) will play a pivotal role in the CCP's strategy, as Beijing aims to strengthen ties with political, business, and community leaders across the Indo-Pacific. This effort is essential to mitigate potential ideological and strategic setbacks resulting from a renewed American presence in the region. Under Xi Jinping, the UNFWD has become increasingly integrated with the political leadership of the CCP, as demonstrated by the appointment of Shi Taifeng as both head of the UNFWD and a member of the Politburo during last October's political reshuffle. This indicates that China's global actions through the UNFWD will closely align with domestic priorities, acting as key drivers for economic growth and party legitimacy.

As China intensifies its efforts to build an anti-Western bloc in the Indo-Pacific, United Front activities are expected to gain momentum. These efforts include influencing academic and policy discourses in the United States, engaging in political interference in Australia and New Zealand, and employing political

---

<sup>23</sup> The missed approval of the IPEF trade pillar for the Asia-Pacific might mean Washington could need to double down on its efforts in making progress for advancement of trade among its signatories and the broader APEC membership. Chris Dixon and Bob Savic, "After APEC: Whither US Leadership on Trade?" *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/after-apec-whither-us-leadership-on-trade/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Davos 2023: Special Address by Liu He, Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China," *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2023, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/davos-2023-special-address-by-liu-he-vice-premier-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

and hybrid warfare tactics in Taiwan. Notably, this trend aligns with the growing influence of members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) within the CCP leadership, signaling Beijing's intention to integrate national development, defense, and foreign policy in its strategic competition, particularly after the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

China's approach in the Indo-Pacific is likely to involve selective engagement in areas directly aligned with Beijing's domestic objectives. Strengthening ties with Pacific countries, which are critical for securing the supply chain for essential raw materials like rare earth elements, will be a priority. At the same time, China will exert diplomatic pressure on Indo-Pacific countries to support its One China policy, leveraging trade and strategic agreements as negotiation tools. A recent example is the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and Nauru, which represented a significant win for Beijing, seeing its influence in the Pacific rise through strong economic and infrastructure investments. In this context, more concerted efforts and engagement from Taiwan and its Western allies will be necessary to counter Beijing's growing influence.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

The 2024 Munich Security Conference highlighted that in the dynamic landscape of U.S.-China strategic competition, 2024 has become a pivotal year in which the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point escalating tensions. China's assertive pursuit of a CCP-centric vision for regional order is met with vigorous resistance from the United States, its allies, and China's neighboring countries, creating a zero-sum dynamic. The concept of multi-alignment—joining various fora without having to choose sides—once preferred by many Indo-Pacific nations now faces mounting challenges due to the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States, whose respective development proposals often conflict. In response to this shifting geopolitical landscape, several regional actors are aligning more closely with the United States on security matters while actively seeking to reduce their economic reliance on China. However, the success of these efforts varies. At the same time, the relevance of inclusive cooperation within the ASEAN framework is waning, as like-minded countries in the region may increasingly turn to new minilateral frameworks designed to counterbalance Chinese influence while minimizing reliance on the West. This shift further intensifies the ongoing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington over the Indo-Pacific.

In the short term, it will be crucial for Washington, its allies, and like-minded partners to demonstrate their ability to translate strategic capabilities into sustained regional commitment, particularly in the economic realm, amid domestic challenges and trade issues. This can potentially be achieved by deploying a comprehensive strategy that confers to governmental agencies, such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, the crucial role of crafting a narrative of collaboration. This narrative should highlight Washington's multifaceted approach in the region, extending beyond security concerns to include

more practical development-oriented policies. Other influential actors and allies, such as Japan and the European Union, must also be included in this strategy to ensure that Indo-Pacific countries have a broader range of options that do not rely solely on Beijing or Washington. This is particularly important in areas where countries may feel uncomfortable choosing sides, such as green energy and infrastructure development.

Thus, relying on allies in this context is critical for contributing to the de-escalation of the competition between the United States and China. U.S. support for broader objectives, such as upholding the rules-based international order, can help refocus South Asian countries on subscribing to shared narratives and goals, such as countering immediate coercive Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Finally, global organizations like the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund can also contribute by promoting a positive narrative of Southeast Asia's unique development, reframing the region's story as one of empowerment rather than a battleground for superpowers.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent official views of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

## About the Authors

Dr. habil. **May-Britt U. Stumbaum** is a Professor of Security Studies and Strategic Competition at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, and Director of The SPEAR Institute.

*E-mail:* maybritt.stumbaum@marshallcenter.org;  
stumbaum@spear-institute.com

**Sharon De Cet** is an Associate Fellow at The SPEAR Institute, working at the intersection of cybersecurity, geopolitics, and regional dynamics.

*E-mail:* decet@spear-institute.com

### Bibliography

- “Chairman’s Statement of the 26th ASEAN-China Summit,” Jakarta, Indonesia, September 6, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-26th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>.
- “China Releases Report on Implementation of Global Security Initiative,” *Xinhua*, July 19, 2024, [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/19/content\\_WS66999e74c6d0868f4e8e93eb.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/19/content_WS66999e74c6d0868f4e8e93eb.html).
- “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, preamble,” updated November 20, 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content\\_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html).
- “Davos 2023: Special Address by Liu He, Vice-Premier of the People’s Republic of China,” World Economic Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/davos-2023-special-address-by-liu-he-vice-premier-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.
- “President Xi Jinping Delivered a Written Speech at the APEC CEO Summit, Underscoring China’s Commitment to Building an Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, November 17, 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesgjtyjtjhtg/202211/t20221117\\_10977274.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesgjtyjtjhtg/202211/t20221117_10977274.html).
- “Speech by Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Seminar on ‘Learning and Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Party’,” *Xinhua*, January 11, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/11/c\\_1126970918.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/11/c_1126970918.htm). - in Chinese
- “The Political Thought of Xi Jinping: A Conversation with Dr. Steve Tsang,” *China Power*, March 28, 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/podcasts/the-political-thought-of-xi-jinping/>.
- “What Is China’s Peace Proposal for Ukraine War?” *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/what-is-chinas-peace-proposal-for-ukraine-war/>.
- “Xi Urges Efforts to Carry Forward Great Founding Spirit of CPC and Yan’an Spirit,” *Xinhua*, October 29, 2022, [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/29/content\\_WS635c022ac6d0a757729e1e5a.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/29/content_WS635c022ac6d0a757729e1e5a.html).
- Allison, Graham, and Robert Blackwill, “Interview: Lee Kuan Yew on the Future of U.S.-China Relations,” Book excerpt, *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/interview-lee-kuan-yew-on-the-future-of-us-china-relations/273657/>.
- Blinken, Antony J., “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” Speech, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

- Chang, Vincent K.L., "China's New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation," *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May 2022): 1053-1069, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia021>.
- Cotterell, Arthur, *The Imperial Capitals of China: An Inside View of the Celestial Empire* (Random House, 2011).
- Dixon, Chris, and Bob Savic, "After APEC: Whither US Leadership on Trade?" *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/after-apec-whither-us-leadership-on-trade/>.
- Drinhausen, Katja, and Helena Legarda, "'Comprehensive National Security' Unleashed: How Xi's Approach Shapes China's Policies at Home and Abroad," *China Monitor*, MERICS, September 15, 2022, <https://merics.org/en/report/comprehensive-national-security-unleashed-how-xis-approach-shapes-chinas-policies-home-and>.
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, "Initiatives Proposed by China, Fruitful Outcomes Shared by World," May 22, 2023, [http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202305/t20230522\\_11081047.htm](http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm).
- Gang, Qin, "How China Sees the World," *The National Interest*, December 26, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-sees-world-206058>.
- Herrero, Alicia García, "What Is Behind China's Dual Circulation Strategy," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 69 (Fall 2021), <https://www.prcleader.org/post/what-is-behind-china-s-dual-circulation-strategy>.
- Millar, Paul, "China's Pacific Charm Offensive Pays off as Nauru Drops Taipei for Beijing," *France 24*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20240116-china-s-pacific-charm-offensive-pays-off-as-nauru-drops-taipei-for-beijing>.
- O'Carroll, Lisa, "EU Proposes Sanctions on Chinese Firms Aiding Russian War Effort," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/14/eu-proposes-sanctions-on-chinese-firms-aiding-russian-war-effort>.
- Por, Shiu Sin, "Tianxia: China's Concept of International Order," *Global Asia* 15, no. 2 (June 2020): 44-50, [https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order\\_shiu-sin-por](https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order_shiu-sin-por).
- Tang, Frank, "Xi Jinping Says China Must Quicken Pace of Tech Self-reliance to Prevent Being 'Strangled by Foreign Countries'," *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3208882/xi-jinping-says-china-must-quicken-pace-tech-self-reliance-prevent-being-strangled-foreign-countries>.
- Tatlow, Didi Kirsten, "China's Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies," *China Monitor*, Mercator Institute for China Studies, July 18, 2018, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>.

Wang, Ban, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Duke University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372448>.

Zhao, Suisheng, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).