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— FOREWORD —

The Mapping China's Strategic Space project builds on the work that the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) has led over the past decade aimed at apprehending Chinese intellectual and political elites' attempts to define a vision of their country as a great power on the world stage. The project's main research question stems from an invitation by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee for the principal investigator, Nadège Rolland, to serve as a witness at the March 2021 hearing "America's Way Forward in the Indo-Pacific" chaired by Representatives Ami Bera and Steve Chabot. To answer the committee's questions about U.S. responses, it seemed first imperative to understand China's vision of the region. Immediately apparent was the fact that Beijing does not designate the region as the "Indo-Pacific" (except to describe U.S. strategy) but as China's "periphery," which suggests a China-centric conception of the region. This denomination itself, what it entailed, and what it included would be worthy of examining in more detail. And so the Mapping China's Strategic Space project was born.

This project could not have been possible without a remarkable group of people. Both NBR and the principal investigator would like to sincerely acknowledge the steadfast Carnegie Corporation New York team for its generous sponsorship and commitment to support original policy-relevant research. The project also benefited immensely from the thoughtful guidance and enthusiastic encouragement of the members of the Steering Committee: Jacqueline Deal, Aaron Friedberg, and Christopher Hughes.

The present report is only a fraction of the body of work that was produced over the past two years, with contributions from the following cohort of outstanding international experts: Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Bernard D. Cole, Gabriel Collins, Peter Connolly, Kelley Currie, Alexis Dudden, Khyle Eastin, Andrew S. Erickson, Aaron Glasserman, Nadine Godehardt, Jakub Grygiel, Bill Hayton, Timothy R. Heath, April A. Herlevi, Elliot S. Ji, Frank Jüris, Tanvi Madan, Jeffrey Mankoff, Covell Meyskens, James A. Millward, Woodruff Smith, Camilla T.N. Sørensen, Bec Strating, Karen Sutter, and Stephen Wertheim.

Our effort to map China's strategic space would have been incomplete without Louis Martin-Vézian's ability to translate abstract concepts into exquisitely crafted visual supports and cartographic representations.

Finally, the principal investigator would be remiss not to recognize her exceptional NBR teammates, who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to help manage, coordinate, organize, research, shoot, brainstorm, edit, and bring to life the project in its finalized form. Thank you Rachel Bernstein, Alayna Bone, Nai-yu Chen, Karolos J. Karnikis, Jessica Keough, Jaymi McNabb, Miles Monaco, Aruna Muthupillai, Jeremy Rausch, Sandra Ward, and Joshua Ziemkowski. Any errors of fact or interpretation that persist in this report are solely the responsibility of its author.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report is to better understand what constitutes the imagined space—beyond both China’s national borders and its claimed land and maritime territories—that its leaders consider vital to the pursuit of their national political, economic, and security objectives and to the achievement of China’s rise.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Domestic discussions about expansion, initiated before the collapse of the Soviet Union, are still ongoing in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Heavily influenced by classical geopolitics, these discussions are intimately linked with the country’s self-perception of power and hegemonic aspirations. The need to strive for space is accompanied by a persistent fear of foreign containment. The definition of an expanded geographic sphere of interest and influence first emerged in the form of a quasi-global mental map around 2013, and this conception continues to endure despite China’s current economic slowdown. More recently, this mental map extended to include economic and ideological “space” as well as physical geographies.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Although fiercely denied by government and academic elites, the PRC’s hegemonic aspirations are palpable, even if they might not materialize in the same way as in previous historical periods. Understanding how its strategic space is defined serves as an early warning of the future direction in which China’s foreign policy and grand strategy could be headed, provided its elites continue to believe that their country’s power is growing relative to that of the U.S.
- PRC elites consider China’s expansion to be the inevitable result of its growing power and interests, and they regard external pushback and efforts to contain this expansion as unavoidable. There is little that external powers can do to assuage Beijing’s fears of hostile foreign containment and encirclement.
- The geostrategic importance of the Eurasian continent and its surrounding oceans for the PRC is unmistakable, as is the linkage between China’s and Russia’s strategic spaces. China’s maritime and global expansion would not have been possible and could not be sustainable without a secure rear area. Russia will continue to be key in Beijing’s geostrategic calculations for the foreseeable future.
- Having expanded to a quasi-global level, China’s definition of its strategic space could increase the risk of contention or even conflict, especially in what it defines as its “strategic new frontiers.” Beijing might also already be facing the prospect of overextension, with the possible need to revise its conception of strategic space. This is an emerging concern for Chinese strategic thinkers that should be considered by their U.S. counterparts.

In September 1939, merely two weeks after Germany's invasion of Poland, a group of leaders from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) met with Assistant Secretary of State George Messersmith. The State Department's policy planning capacity was nonexistent at the time, and CFR leaders offered to help the U.S. government prepare for the postwar world. Staunch internationalists, CFR members believed in greater U.S. involvement and leadership in world affairs, commensurate with the country's growing economic power. With the State Department's approval and the Rockefeller Foundation's financial support, CFR officially launched a project named "Studies of American Interests in the War and the Peace," aimed at examining the war's effects on the United States and developing concrete proposals to safeguard U.S. interests once peace again prevailed. During the subsequent five years, several hundred U.S. leaders and experts from civil society, academia, business, and government, organized in five focused study groups, participated in over three hundred meetings and produced close to seven hundred reports dispatched to the State Department and the White House.¹

In July 1941, CFR's Economic and Financial Group completed a study introducing the concept of a "grand area" comprising most of the non-German world and including the "Western Hemisphere, the United Kingdom, the remainder of the British Commonwealth and Empire, the Dutch Indies, China and Japan."² Based primarily on calculations of the need for continued U.S. access to export markets, as well as to raw materials and other products necessary to maintain a maximum defense effort, the definition of a quasi-global geographic sphere of U.S. interests also had military implications. As the report noted: "The United States should use its military power to protect the maximum possible area of the non-German world from control by Germany in order to maintain for its sphere of interest a superiority of economic power over that of the German sphere."³ In a world threatened by totalitarian mass conquest, the initial quest for sustained economic defense led U.S. planners to leap "from a hemispheric to a global mental map of U.S. interests and responsibilities," a shift "which has proved enduring in the eight decades since."⁴

Such discussions of a U.S. "grand area" are not as incongruous in a study pertaining to China's "strategic space" as one might think. Just like their U.S. counterparts in the early 1940s, Chinese strategists since the mid-1980s have been primarily concerned about the definition of a grand area necessary to ensure their country's survival and enduring development—a sphere of interest where they would strive to maintain superiority, which they call China's "strategic space" (*zhanlüe kongjian*). They too envision enlarged mental maps of interests and responsibilities, and their spatial horizons have over time expanded to the global and even beyond. Both the United States' "grand area" and China's "strategic space" deliberations evolved into a proactive, outward-directed endeavor from an initially defensive perspective developed in the face of a perceived

¹ This section draws heavily from G. William Domhoff, "The Council on Foreign Relations and the Grand Area: Case Studies on the Origins of the IMF and the Vietnam War," *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 2, no. 1 (2014): 1–41.

² *Ibid.*

³ Stephen Wertheim, "To the Grand Area and Beyond: The Sudden Transformation of the United States' Strategic Space," National Bureau of Asian Research, Mapping China's Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/to-the-grand-area-and-beyond-the-sudden-transformation-of-the-united-states-strategic-space>.

⁴ Wertheim, "To the Grand Area and Beyond." For an enlightening examination of the evolution of the U.S. conceptualization of its geostrategic space as reflected in 1940s map projections, see He Guangqiang, "Erzhan qijian Meiguo diyuanzhanlüe kongjian guannian bianqian: Jiyu ditu touying de shijiao" [The U.S. Geostrategic Space Concept's Transformation during World War II: A Perspective Based on Map Projection], *Scientia Geographica Sinica* 39, no. 5 (2019).

existential threat. For the United States, these discussions took place in the context of an ongoing war, with totalitarian powers on the march, engaged in territorial conquest, seizing control of resources, and actively threatening to destroy friendly European and Asian powers, and potentially eventually the United States. For China, the perceived existential threat takes the form of a hostile U.S. global hegemon, which, even at a time of ostensibly friendly cooperative relations, is seen through the lenses of regime insecurity as bent on ideological subversion, economic suppression, and military encirclement. Finally, both grand area and strategic space discussions took place during a period when U.S. and Chinese elites came to believe that their country was experiencing a dramatic increase in its relative material power and sought to obtain an advantageous, even dominant, long-term geostrategic position for their nation once the major existential threat had been beaten back. In sum, similar to the grand area idea, the concept of strategic space is truly about China's accession to great-power status and pursuit of global primacy.

As ever, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of open-source research when examining emergent strategic concepts in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This report is based on publicly available Chinese-language writings primarily published by military and academic thinkers over the last 40 years and does not include government archives nor personal interviews. As such, it only presents one sliver of what is undoubtedly a bigger, more complex picture involving, among others, government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, and is therefore incomplete. In addition, it may be difficult to ascertain the connection between the experts involved in these discussions and the highest political decision-making echelons. However, most of the strategic thinkers cited in this report can be categorized as workers of the state simply because the entities they belong to are organically linked to either Chinese state or CCP organs. Some participants in these deliberations explicitly describe as their main duty serving the leadership's development of a grand strategy. Nonetheless, these discussions about strategic space are not hosted within a single government-endorsed task force, with an explicit mission to fill in for the state's planning capacity; rather, they are the product of a massive officially endorsed collective intellectual effort evidently designed to inform the leadership's deliberations and to support and elaborate on its basic decisions. The participants in these discussions advance like a school of fish—each of them distinct and emanating from different centers across the system, but generally moving in parallel in a similar direction over time. Finally, despite limited exceptions, it is impossible to determine who influenced whom in the process, and whether specific intellectual interests, directions of enquiries, themes, or formulations emerge from government bureaucracies or party organs behind closed doors before they are picked up by intellectuals, or the other way around. It is possible that these interactions are horizontal rather than vertical, and that political and intellectual spheres are constantly interacting via channels hidden to the public eye and mutually nourishing each other's thinking. The reality of the challenges described above must be recognized—not as a way to dismiss the body of work presented here but as an encouragement to further research.

Although imperfect, the preliminary examination of the strategic space concept introduced by this report illuminates how Chinese elites conceive of an imagined realm well beyond China's national borders in a way that was previously unthinkable due to the country's relative weakness. As such, this study serves as an early warning of the future direction in which China's foreign policy may be headed as its power grows.

What is under scrutiny is not the recovery of territories lost with the collapse of the Qing empire depicted in “national humiliation maps” or what William Callahan poetically describes

as a process of “re-membering”—the re-attachment of previously dismembered limbs to China’s national “geobody” that would eventually reconcile the tension between past unbounded imperial domain and present sovereign nation-state territory.⁵ In addition to the well-documented, ongoing aggressive behavior exhibited by the PRC in the South and East China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait, recent manifestations of this desire to incorporate disputed territories as its own include the 2023 release of the PRC’s new “standard” map reaffirming Beijing’s claims to sovereignty over both maritime features in the South China sea and around Taiwan, as well as land in the Himalayas and at the border with Russia;⁶ the regularly updated list of rectified toponyms in disputed areas;⁷ and the passing of the 2021 Land and State Boundary Law whose language leaves open the possibility of future effective control through construction or occupation.⁸ Although the PRC’s territorial claims are far from negligible, they are not the main concern of the contemporary strategic thinkers examined in this study. Their strategic horizons do not stop at China’s borders; rather, what they have in mind is a global map of China’s expanded power.

Unpacking the strategic space concept and observing how it has evolved since it first emerged in the mid-1980s brings to light the significance of spatial considerations and the deep-seated influence of classical geopolitics on contemporary Chinese strategic thinking. Descriptions of China’s expansion as an existential, inevitable process suggest a vision of the state that echoes early twentieth-century European *geopolitik*. This system of thought portrays the state as analogous to an organism that has to struggle for space to survive within a world fraught by intense competition.⁹ Chinese contemporary geopoliticians do not go as far as their European forebearers in advocating territorial acquisitions to secure mineral and agricultural resources, but anthropomorphized undertones are reflected in their use of imageries of “choked” and “squeezed” spaces and claims about the need of expanded space for national “survival and growth.” The pervasive influence of classical geopolitics is also apparent in discussions about great-power containment schemes, the strategic advantages conferred to maritime versus continental powers, and the quest for “new frontiers” as desirable extensions of an existing space deemed too constricted for comfort. Geopolitical conceptualizations also take the form of friendly or hostile variable geometries of lines, arcs, circles, spheres, pan-regions, peripheries, and cores. More recent strands of discussion seem to converge toward the definition of a realm unbound by territorial borders and framed in civilizational terms, in which imperial resonances can be found. As Oxford professor Vivienne Shue hypothesizes, “an updated ideal of imperial China and of China as an empire could be what [is] actually inhabiting political imaginations in Beijing.”¹⁰

⁵ William A. Callahan, “The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China’s Geobody,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 141–73. See also John Agnew, “Looking Back to Look Forward: Chinese Geopolitical Narratives and China’s Past,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, no. 3 (2012): 301–14.

⁶ The 2023 edition of the national map is available from *China Daily* at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/28/WS64ec91c2a31035260b81ea5b.html>.

⁷ “India Rejects China’s Renaming of 30 Places in Himalayan Border State,” Reuters, April 2, 2024; Ralph Jennings, “Why Is China Renaming Disputed Locations around Asia?” *Voice of America*, January 6, 2022; “Ziran ziyuan bu guanyu yinfa ‘gongkai ditu neirong biaooshi guifan’ de tongzhi” [Notice of the Ministry of Natural Resources on the Issuance of “Representation Standards for Public Maps Content”], State Council Information Office (PRC), February 6, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2023/content_5752310.htm.

⁸ “The PRC’s Land Borders Law,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, October 23, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Portals/55/Documents/Legal/J06%20TACAID%20-%20PRC%20LAND%20BORDERS%20LAW%20-%20FINAL.pdf?ver=zp6y0pfpaAWoL5KOv0KDYg%3D%3D>.

⁹ Christopher Hughes identified this trend in PRC domestic politics in his seminal article “Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 601–20.

¹⁰ Vivienne Shue, “Re-imagining China (and China Studies) in the Post Post–Cold War” (keynote speech at Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier, Copenhagen, November 26, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV04_SBGmLA. See also Vivienne Shue, “Regimes of Resonance: Cosmos, Empire, and Changing Technologies of CCP Rule,” *Modern China* 48, no. 4 (2022): 679–720.

To paraphrase Sir John Robert Seeley's infamous 1883 essay in which he rejected the concept of a "little England" in favor of a "greater Britain" whose history is "not in England but in America and Asia," the foundation of a "greater China" is not happening "in a fit of absence of mind" but has been hashed over by a diligent intellectual hivemind for several decades.¹¹ Leaders of the collective brain that includes geographers, international relations specialists, and practitioners appear to belong predominantly to military and national security circles. These thinkers seem to wield enough influence within the party-state system that their ideas end up reverberating and, at times, eventually being endorsed at the highest political level.

Of course, the significantly expanded Chinese strategic space they collectively describe still exists mainly in the depths of their imaginations. But the mental maps they are delineating could anticipate a desired future reality that aligns with another dream expressed by Xi Jinping himself—that of China's great resurgence.¹² After all, as John Brian Harley writes, lands were "claimed on paper before they were effectively occupied," and in this sense "maps anticipated empire."¹³ Even if contemporary strategists do not publicly display any intention of reproducing European precedents and carving up the world both on paper and on the ground,¹⁴ their imaginary strategic space maps reflect their intimate beliefs about China's proper place in the world—not its localization in world geography, but its "rightful place" at the center of the world and at the top of the international system.

Demarcating China's strategic space is therefore really an exercise in "re-centering" China to reflect the rise of its power and the shift of the world's center of gravity from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific. Whether candidly acknowledged as a result of China's self-confidence in its growing power, or half-heartedly concealed so as not to bear the abominated stain of imperialism, the degree of Beijing's ambitions is unmistakable. It appears in plain sight in the novel planisphere projections that Chinese Academy of Sciences geographer Hao Xiaoguang has been working on since the early 2000s. Hao's vertical map, which centers the Southern Hemisphere on China and pushes the United States to the periphery, was officially adopted in 2013 and has since been displayed in classrooms throughout the country.¹⁵

Looking back 40 years, it in hindsight is possible to discern three overlapping waves of focused intellectual interest that have accompanied the maturation of the idea of an expanded strategic space for China and its subsequent execution at the political level. These periods are examined sequentially in the core chapters of this report. After a first section that examines the emergence of the "strategic space" concept, its definition, and eventual propulsion into officialdom in 2013, the second chapter considers how Chinese intellectual elites reinvested in geopolitics at the end

¹¹ John Robert Seeley, "The Expansion of England," 1883, available at <https://web.viu.ca/davies/H479B.Imperialism.Nationalism/Seeley.Br.Expansion.imperial.1883.htm>.

¹² Emmanuel Dubois de Prisque, "La cartographie en Chine du 'rêve chinois' à la réalité géopolitique" [Chinese Cartography from the 'China Dream' to Geopolitical Reality], *Outre-Terre* 1, no. 38 (2014).

¹³ John Brian Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 277–312.

¹⁴ The imagery of China being "carved up like a watermelon" by great powers during the late Qing period endures to this day as part of the CCP-sanctioned narrative of national humiliation. See Rudolf G. Wagner, "Dividing Up the [Chinese] Melon, Guafen 瓜分: The Fate of a Transcultural Metaphor in the Formation of National Myth," *Journal of Transcultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 9–122, <https://heip.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/23700/17430>. See also Yiqing Xu and Jiannan Zhao, "The Power of History: How a Victimization Narrative Shapes National Identity and Public Opinion in China," *Research and Politics* 10, no. 2 (2023).

¹⁵ An image of Hao Xiaoguang's map is available at <http://www.hxgmap.com/imag3/1309dst.jpg>. See also Sun Zifa, "Hengshu kan shijie, you he da butong? Zhuanfang shu ban shijie ditu bianzhi zhe Hao Xiaoguang" [What Is the Big Difference between Looking at the World Vertically and Horizontally? An Exclusive Interview with Hao Xiaoguang, Compiler of the Vertical World Map], China News Service, April 14, 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2021/04-14/9454454.shtml>.

of the Cold War and the lessons they learned from a discipline long considered as toxic because of its association with imperialism. The turn of the century marks the beginning of a second period, a “golden decade” during which PRC analysts were absorbed by the concept of power. The third chapter follows their deliberations in lockstep as they attempt to define China’s core interests, ponder its maritime and continental geopolitical nature, learn from successes and failures of past rising powers, and assess how to position China relative to other great powers. As they grew increasingly confident about their country’s ascending trajectory as well as increasingly apprehensive about its security environment, Chinese strategic thinkers began developing a new grammar of expansion and delineating more precisely the extended contours of China’s strategic space, a process that is revealed in chapter 4. The concluding chapter explores whether and how the global pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and China’s most recent economic challenges have affected the mental map of China’s strategic space.

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CHAPTER 1

Strategic Space

Before mapping what constitutes the strategic space of the People's Republic of China (PRC), we must begin with defining what the concept entails. Broadly speaking, it can be described as the imagined space beyond China's national borders that its leaders consider as vital to the pursuit of national political, economic, and security objectives and to the eventual achievement of China's rise. Driven by both defensive and offensive motives, Beijing's interest in seeking additional strategic space may be interpreted as a form of 21st-century imperial expansion. Although the "strategic space" terminology was not officially endorsed until 2013, detailed discussions of "strategic frontiers" began to emerge in Chinese military circles in the late 1980s. Well before the appearance of such specific language, however, Mao Zedong had already thought about securing and expanding China's strategic space, as his involvement in the Korean War, his negotiations with Joseph Stalin over Mongolia and the Soviet border, his Theory of the Three Worlds, and the early 1970s clarification of claims to the South China Sea can attest. As will be further developed in the subsequent chapters, the evolution of China's strategic thinking about the nexus between geography, space, and power is a gradual process and the result of both domestic politics and changes in China's international security environment. For now, this chapter will focus on explaining what "strategic space" means.

Two Chinese documents provide detailed descriptions of "strategic space." The first is a 1987 newspaper article signed by a People's Liberation Army (PLA) senior officer who would later become the deputy director of the PLA General Staff Department. The second is a chapter in the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, an essential authoritative source that "reveals how some of the PLA's top strategists assess China's security environment, how military force should be used to secure China's interests, and what kinds of military capabilities the PLA should develop in the future."¹

Origin Story

The origin of the strategic space concept can be traced back to Chinese military circles at a time when the PLA was undergoing significant doctrinal changes. During the three decades of Mao's rule, his military doctrine had been based on his belief that, in case of an invasion, China's geographic landmass would provide the strategic depth necessary to absorb, disperse, and defeat the enemy's attack. His wary eye was fixated on China's giant northern and western neighbor, the Soviet Union, the former revolutionary brother in arms with whom Mao had parted in the early 1960s. In a nutshell, his general command to his troops was to "lure the enemy in deep and actively defend." In March 1980, Deng Xiaoping and the marshals who sat in the Central Military Commission (CMC) discarded the first half of Mao's command and enjoined the military to focus instead on frontier defense and "active defense."² The leadership's engagement in a thorough reassessment of China's threat environment culminated in the 1985 CMC meeting's endorsement of Deng's decision to shift away from preparing for total war against a massive Soviet attack.

¹ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Changing Approach to Military Strategy: The Science of Military Strategy from 2001 and 2013," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Political Science Department Research Paper, no. 2016-15, April 2016. There are only four editions of the *Science of Military Strategy*, published in 1987, 2001, 2013, and 2020.

² David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 62–64.

Instead, the PLA was to get ready to fight local wars,³ i.e., “conflicts of relatively low intensity and short duration [that] could break out virtually anywhere on China’s periphery.”⁴ This fundamental doctrinal shift henceforth flipped the PLA’s mental conceptualization of the strategic space it would have to operate in: from a focus on the threat of a massive-scale invasion that would mainly be coming from China’s northern and northwestern continental borders and would be faced by “luring” enemy fighters deep into the Chinese territorial landmass to a focus on conflicts possibly occurring at multiple locations along all of China’s “strategic frontiers” (*zhanlüe bianjiang*), which would require PLA forward deployments, including outside the national territory.

In the context of these doctrinal shifts, M. Taylor Fravel understands strategic frontiers in strictly military terms as “forward areas”—a comprehensive system of border defense including a unified land, sea, and air defense.⁵ Michael Swaine offers a more intricate description: “The Chinese principle of ‘strategic frontier’ is intended to encompass the full range of competitive areas or boundaries implied by the notion of comprehensive national strength, including land, maritime, and outer space frontiers, as well as more abstract strategic realms related to China’s economic and technological development.”⁶ Former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe gave his own interpretation of the meaning of this concept in a 2010 speech at the Hudson Institute:

Since the 1980s, China’s military strategy has rested on the concept of a “strategic frontier.” In a nutshell, this very dangerous idea posits that borders and exclusive economic zones are determined by national power, and that as long as China’s economy continues to grow, its sphere of influence will continue to expand. Some might associate this with the German concept of “lebensraum.”⁷

One of the most detailed and early explanations of the strategic frontier concept can be found in a 1987 *PLA Daily* article signed by Senior Colonel Xu Guangyu.⁸ Several international experts on the PLA have acknowledged it in their writings.⁹ Abe’s speechwriters must have studied it too, as will become apparent in the following description. Xu’s original text is not accessible anymore, but, fortunately, there remains a 1988 English version translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.¹⁰ The article is worth unpacking as it gives precious indications about the strategic elites’ early mental map of China’s present and future strategic space. Xu writes from his perspective as a military strategist pondering the implications for the Chinese armed forces of the doctrinal revolution recently introduced by Deng Xiaoping and the CMC. His analysis rests on the fundamental question of the adequation between national defense forces requirements and

³ M. Taylor Fravel, “The Evolution of China’s Military Strategy: Comparing the 1987 and 1999 Editions of *Zhanlüexue*,” in “China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army,” ed. James Mulvenon and David Finkelstein, CNA, 2005, 79–99.

⁴ Michael D. Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1996), 39.

⁵ Fravel, “The Evolution of China’s Military Strategy.”

⁶ Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*.

⁷ Shinzo Abe (remarks on U.S.-Japanese relations, Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., October 15, 2010), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/AbeEventTranscript.pdf>.

⁸ Xu Guangyu was promoted to major general in 1988 and became director of the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association after his retirement in 1994. He is a regular media commentator on security and strategic issues.

⁹ See, for example, Nan Li, “The PLA’s Evolving Warfighting Doctrine, Strategy and Tactics, 1985–95: A Chinese Perspective,” *China Quarterly*, no. 146 (1996): 443–63; Hwang Byong-Moo, “Changing Military Doctrines of the PRC: The Interaction between the People’s War and Technology,” *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1997): 221–66; and Shambaugh, *Modernizing China’s Military*.

¹⁰ Xu Guangyu, “Extending Strategic Boundaries Past Geographic Borders,” trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, JPRS-CAR-88-016, March 29, 1988, 35–38, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA348698.pdf>. The original article is entitled “Zhuiqiu heli de sanwei zhanlüe bianjiang” [Pursuit of Equitable Three-Dimensional Strategic Boundaries], *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 3, 1987.

national strategic goals “expressed...primarily in the different pursuit of geographic borders and strategic boundaries.”¹¹

Whereas geographic borders comprise “territorial land, territorial waters, and corresponding territorial air” (in other words, the three dimensions of national territory over which the government exerts sovereign rule), Xu notes that strategic frontiers are not as well defined. Yet, they “determine a country’s and a people’s living space” and are related to “a country’s interests that [its] military forces are actually able to control.” Even for a vast country like China, there are limits to what the land can provide, but progress in science and technology will enable humankind to “greatly expand [its] conquest of natural space” and “obtain all sorts of riches” it needs for its existence. For more narrowly focused military reasons, pushing the battlefield “from the geographic border to the strategic boundary” is also necessary to obtain an “early warning space and a strategic depth that are vastly larger than formerly” and will enable “earliest discovery and interception of enemy intrusions.” While geographic borders are internationally recognized and “relatively stable and defined,” strategic frontiers may “extend and retract” as comprehensive national power increases or decreases. Although they are defined by “the ability of military power to extend effective control” over them, they are in reality the “embodiment” of a country’s total “real power”—national economy, science and technology, politics, society, national defense, and foreign relations—that backs up national power. Indeed, “only countries that are strong and prosperous in a total sense can possess the power to push their strategic boundaries beyond their geographic borders.” Both “complement each other”: power enables “effective and stable” expansion, while expansion strengthens and supports power. Finally, strategic frontiers are contested spaces in which various powers compete to develop and expand: a “visible” space comprising “large tracts of continental shelf and the high seas, polar regions, and outer space,” as well as an “invisible” space of “power spheres and ideology.”

Xu’s description makes it clear that he does not understand strategic frontiers only as narrow buffer zones protecting the approaches of a country’s national territory, nor as a mere equivalent to the strategic depth usually coveted by military planners. Referring to the enduring existence of strategic frontiers throughout history, he chooses two telling examples: Genghis Khan’s continental empire, which Xu coyly describes as “strategic boundaries on land that were historically unprecedented in their vastness,” and the British empire, whose gunboats opened “strategic ocean frontiers” and enabled its “global ability to control the seas.” Could “strategic frontiers” actually be a euphemism for imperial expansion? To assuage the reader’s possible concerns about his implicit intent, Xu makes an agile distinction between, on the one hand, “hegemonist countries” with a global appetite and expansionist countries that seek “regional aggressionist” strategic frontiers and, on the other hand, “peace-loving countries” that only seek “legitimate” strategic frontiers. Unsurprisingly, China is described in the next sentence as a “peace-loving socialist country whose strategic goals are extremely clear cut”: peace and development. Xu’s implacable demonstration ensues. A peaceful and stable external environment is indispensable to achieve the double national objectives of quadrupling the gross national output value by the end of the 20th century and of China taking off during the 21st century to ensure “entering the ranks” of leading world powers by 2049. Achieving these national objectives and safeguarding its legitimate interests therefore necessitates that China “possesses” and “maintains” a multidimensional enlarged strategic space:

¹¹ Xu’s article title uses the term *bianjiang*, which is usually translated as “frontiers” or “borderlands” rather than “boundaries.” I will use the more appropriate term “frontiers” whenever not quoting the original translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

land, sea, air, deep sea, and outer space strategic frontiers; “security space, living space, scientific and technical development space”; and “space for economic activities.” Winning the “required space for security and development is completely synonymous with the strategic policy of active defense that China pursues,” Xu asserts. This is “neither expansion of geographic borders nor expansionist or hegemonic aggressive expansion of strategic boundaries.” Presumably this is something that the reader will find reassuring.

Official Debut

The 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* displays many similarities with Xu Guangyu’s ideas, albeit this time using the term “strategic space” (*zhanlüe kongjian*) rather than “strategic frontiers.” The concept is explicitly defined as follows:

Strategic space is the area necessary for a nation or a country to resist against external interference and aggression, and maintain its own survival and development. Its outer edge depends not only on the national interests’ scope of expansion, but also on the distance within which military capabilities can be projected.... The national strategic space is based on the country’s territorial land, sea, airspace, and other areas under sovereign jurisdiction, and can appropriately extend and radiate according to the needs of maintaining its security and development. Strategic space expands along with the development of human economic, scientific and technological, and warfare activities, donning different features and characteristics depending on time periods.¹²

Similarly to Xu, authors of the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* acknowledge that strategic space is multidimensional. Whereas Xu’s article identified three dimensions (land-sea, space, and ocean depths), the *Science of Military Strategy* distinguishes five of them (land, sea, air, outer space, and cyberspace) that appeared at different points in history as a result of technological advances. In the “agricultural age,” strategic space was essentially a flat, land-based surface. With progress in sea and air navigation technologies during the “industrial age,” it became a three-dimensional space. In the 1950s, outer space was added as a fourth, “high frontier” dimension. Finally, the introduction of information network technologies in the 1960s created a fifth, intangible dimension in which human society, production, and warfare now also operate.¹³ The traditional conception of strategic space as a flat land surface is therefore obsolete and needs to give way to a “new strategic space view,” which strives to “externally push the strategic forward edge from the home territory to the peripheral, from land to sea, from air to space, and from tangible spaces to intangible spaces, to expand the strategic depth and gradually form into a new three-dimensional strategic space: of surrounding and protecting the home territory, radiating to the periphery, and taking care of both the physical and virtual realms” (see **Figure 1**).¹⁴

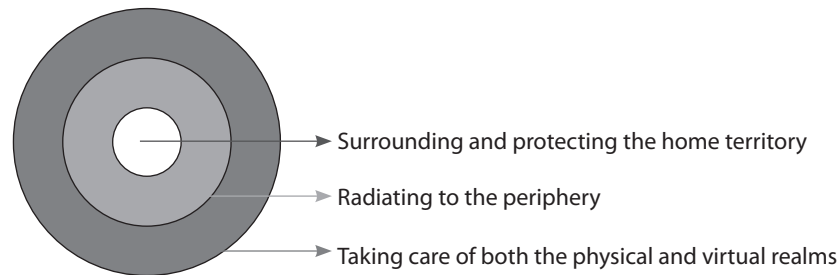
Like Xu, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* recognizes the mutually reinforcing interaction between comprehensive national power and the extent of a country’s strategic space: “Strong comprehensive national power provides a robust support to the expansion of strategic space, while the expansion of strategic space also provides an important condition for the strengthening

¹² Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 241–42, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 242, 244–45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

FIGURE 1 Three-dimensional strategic space



SOURCE Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013).

and promotion of comprehensive national power.”¹⁵ Both documents have also in common their acknowledgment of the inherently contested nature of strategic space. Not only is it the case that one country’s “natural extension” will “inevitably” bump against “adjacent regions under sovereign jurisdiction,”¹⁶ but global commons (space, cybernetworks, deep sea, and polar regions) have become “hot spots for strategic struggles” because “some developed countries take advantage of their own superiority” to create “obstacles for latecomers.”¹⁷

Finally, although the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* does not go as far as Xu in describing strategic space as the equivalent of an imperial realm, it resonates with the senior colonel’s depiction of China’s defensive and peace-loving expansionism. The document recommends that China produce an overall plan ensuring a smooth future expansion process, stipulating, in particular, that the country “walk[ed] the road of expansion possessing the characteristics of the times and Chinese characteristics,” while maintaining a “peaceful development path” and a “military strategy defensive in nature.”¹⁸ It thus advocates for China to “moderately expand” its strategic space.¹⁹ To that effect, China should “gradually push forward” in space and cyberspace (the “pivot”) as well as in the maritime area (the “focus”).²⁰ In an initial effort to delineate the extent of China’s strategic mental map, the document describes this maritime area as including “the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, as well as the littoral regions of neighboring Asia, Africa, Oceania, North America, South America, Antarctica and others,” altogether covering over 50% of the globe. This area is “crucial in influencing our nation’s future strategic development and security. It is also the intermediate zone for our access to the Atlantic Ocean region, the Mediterranean Sea region, and the Arctic Ocean region” (see **Figure 2**).

It is not totally surprising that discussions of expansion should emerge from military circles. After all, their mission is to safeguard and defend their country’s national interests. If these

¹⁵ Shou, *Science of Military Strategy*, 248, 243–44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 244, 246.

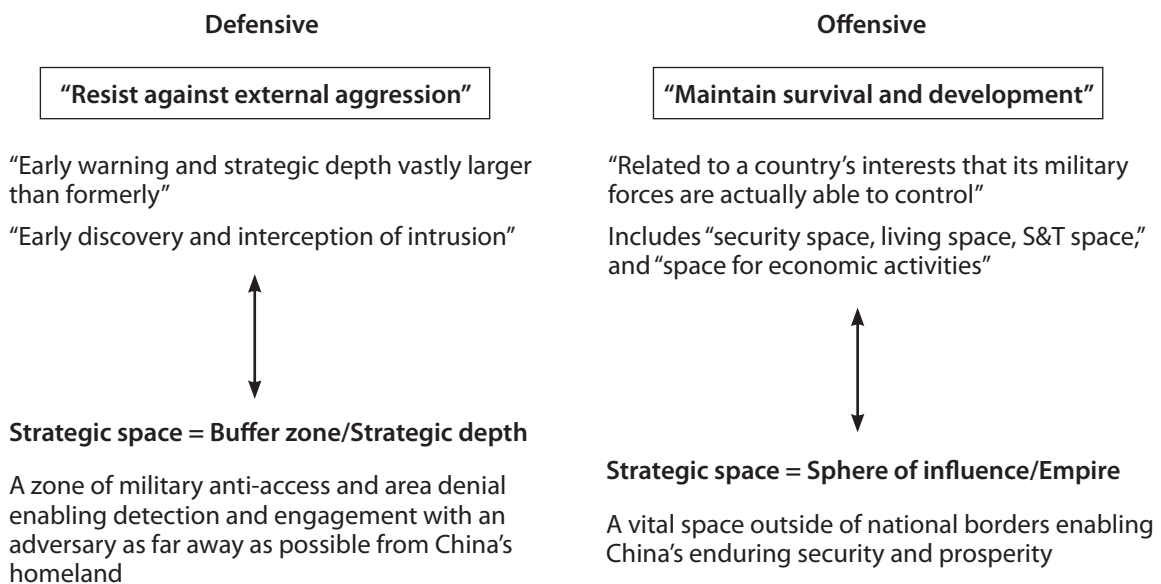
FIGURE 2 China's maritime strategic space according to the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*



interests were to expand around the globe, then the projection range of the PLA would eventually need to grow accordingly. Therefore, military planners need to anticipate the scope, size, and direction of their nation's future strategic space. Only then can they start building a force that is able to "protect China's legitimate rights and interests," "operate on a battlefield removed from China," move rapidly over great distances, and fight in any of the future battlefield's multiple dimensions.²¹

However, as discussed above, the strategic space concept not only covers future military areas of responsibility. It introduces the idea of outward expansion as indispensable to the enduring survival of the country, and such expansion is not narrowly confined to territorial conquest. To that effect, military expert Jacqueline Deal believes that strategic space will be used by the PLA to "make it safe for the PRC to coerce regional powers and, over time, to spread the [Chinese Communist Party's] own rules and norms."²² As the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* notes, strategic space relates to the "future destiny of the nation" in the process of its rise.²³ Reduced to a simple equation, strategic space equals territory under national jurisdiction plus any space beyond that may be vital to the pursuit of national economic and security objectives and the enduring survival of the Chinese state. Its dual nature is summarized in **Figure 3**. The following chapters will unpack the perceived constraints imposed on China's strategic space and the promises its expansion offers, as seen by Chinese strategic thinkers since the end of the Cold War.

FIGURE 3 The dual nature of strategic space



²¹ Xu, "Extending Strategic Boundaries Past Geographic Borders," 38.

²² Jacqueline N. Deal, testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on "China's Military Reforms and Modernization: Implications for the United States," Washington, D.C., February 15, 2018.

²³ Shou, *Science of Military Strategy*, 241.

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CHAPTER 2

The Return of Geopolitics

There is an instinctive—albeit not deterministic—connection between space (in the sense of either territory or geography) and power, and numerous geographers, historians, political scientists, and philosophers have over the years attempted to uncover the laws that govern such a relationship.¹ Rudolf Kjellén, the Swedish political scientist, geographer, and politician who coined the term “geopolitics,” intended to find a scientific way of analyzing the international behavior of states. He proceeded to do so by putting the emphasis on “the physical character, size and relative location of the territory of the state as central to its power position in the international system.”² Similarly, Halford Mackinder, in his seminal 1904 lecture “The Geographical Pivot of History,” described his ambition to seek a “formula” that would “have a practical value as setting into perspective some of the competing forces in current international politics.”³ For political analysts interested in power—its accumulation, extension, and contraction—geopolitics can provide insights, or at a minimum a systematic framework useful to help think about specific strategic directions on the world map. Chinese intellectual and strategic circles preoccupied with achieving their nation’s “peaceful rise” and “great rejuvenation” in the context of enhanced great-power competition appear as ideal candidates for exploring spatial relations and their effects on great powers’ “national fortunes” and tribulations.⁴

For most years since the founding of the PRC, geopolitics as an academic discipline was banned in China. Nevertheless, Chinese strategists never ceased to think in geopolitical terms. At the end of the Cold War, both government experts and academics sought to assess the implications of the great-power shifts occurring in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse for their nation’s security. The explanatory power of the geopolitical discipline proved useful to understand the strategic logic of the American hegemon and draw lessons for what would come next. As China’s rise became the talk of the town in the mid-2000s, geopolitics additionally provided a convenient framework to test out geostrategies fitting China’s impending position as a great power on the world stage.

A Brief History of Geopolitics as an Academic Discipline in the PRC

Geopolitics Outlawed

Geopolitics was prohibited as an academic discipline in the PRC until the 1990s. It had first appeared in China during the troubled times of its transition from empire to nation-state. Shellen Xiao Wu notes that the Chinese term for geopolitics (*diyuanzhengzhixue*) “only began circulating in the 1930s, but the underlying ideas that connect geography, natural resources, and social Darwinian competition had circulated much earlier in late Qing translations from the Japanese.”⁵ Issues that geopolitics purported to address resonated deeply with circles of freshly minted Chinese geographers primarily concerned with ensuring their country’s survival as an independent state

¹ Pierre Buhler, “Puissance et géographie au XXIème siècle” [Power and Geography in the 21st Century], *Géoeconomie*, no. 1 (2013): 147.

² Sven Holdar, “The Ideal State and the Power of Geography: The Life-Work of Rudolf Kjellén,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 3 (1992): 319. Together with German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel, of “Lebensraum” fame, Kjellén founded the German geopolitical school at the turn of the twentieth century.

³ Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 422.

⁴ Shi Yinong, “Shijie xiandai shi shang de diyuanzhengzhi hongguan jili ji qi daguo guoyun xiaoying” [Geopolitical Macro Mechanisms in Global Modern History and Their Effects on Great Powers’ National Fortunes], *Aisixiang*, January 5, 2019, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/114392.html>.

⁵ Shellen Xiao Wu, *Birth of the Geopolitical Age: Global Frontiers and the Making of Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 3.

at a time of great political shifts and looming existential threats.⁶ Geopolitics blossomed in China during the 1940s. On the eve of the Japanese invasion, works from British and German political geographers expounding the mechanics of world hegemony were translated and published as cautionary tales by Chinese intellectuals eager to “cultivate the geopolitical awareness” of their fellow citizens.⁷ Later on, in 1941, some of them even established an association of geopolitics (*diyuanzhengzhixue xiehui*) during their Chongqing exile.⁸ As Wu explains, Chinese intellectuals under the Japanese siege “turned to geopolitics as both an explanation for and a solution to China’s wartime dilemma. This select group of Chinese intellectuals mined German philosophy and literature for analogies to the Chinese situation” (see **Figure 1**).⁹

The Communist rulers of the “new China” rejected geopolitics as a theory of expansionism and a defense of imperialist aggression.¹⁰ For 40 years following the founding of the PRC, geopolitical research was therefore declared off-limits. Foreign geopolitical works remained of interest, albeit largely as objects of academic criticism.¹¹ During that period, classical writings were translated into Chinese, including Yuri Semenov’s *Fascist Geopolitics in the Service of American Imperialism*, Nicholas Spykman’s *The Geography of Peace*, Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, John R.V. Prescott’s *The Political Geography of the Oceans*, and Sergey Gorshkov’s *Navies in War and Peace*.¹²

Ploughing the Geopolitical Field

The prohibition on geopolitical research was eventually lifted after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when “great changes occurred in the global political pattern and in the geo-environment in which China is located.”¹³ As their forefathers had done at the dawn of the twentieth century, Chinese elites turned to geopolitics to help explain the great shifts occurring in their environment and find solutions to the predicaments they posed. The Chinese government, according to Fudan professor Pan Zhongqi, had by that point recognized the importance of geopolitics and acknowledged the necessity to think about strategies in a manner more tailored to the epochal changes underway.¹⁴ The first step was to better grasp their essence. And so Chinese scholars, though initially reluctant to engage with what they considered as toxic imperialist theories, began to re-engage with the field of geopolitics.

A second wave of geopolitical revival occurred in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, as Chinese elites began to feel the tremors of yet another tectonic shift—this one caused not by the collapse of a foreign great power but by the rise of China itself. “As we all know,” noted a 2017 panel of Tsinghua University professors assessing China’s comprehensive national power,

⁶ Wu, *Birth of the Geopolitical Age*, 134–43. Geography was another scientific discipline imported from the West during that period. See Rachel Wallner, “Science, Space, and the Nation: The Formation of Modern Chinese Geography in Twentieth-Century China” (master’s thesis, Department of Asian Studies, University of Oregon, 2014).

⁷ Liu Xiaofeng, “Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi” [National Anxieties and Geopolitical Consciousness], *Hainan daxue xuebao* 1 (2021).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Wu, *Birth of the Geopolitical Age*, 140.

¹⁰ Ge Hanwen, “Diyuanzhengzhi yanjiu de dangdai fuxing ji qi Zhongguo yiyi” [The Contemporary Revival of Geopolitical Studies and Its Significance for China], *Guoji zhanwang*, no. 2 (2015): 81.

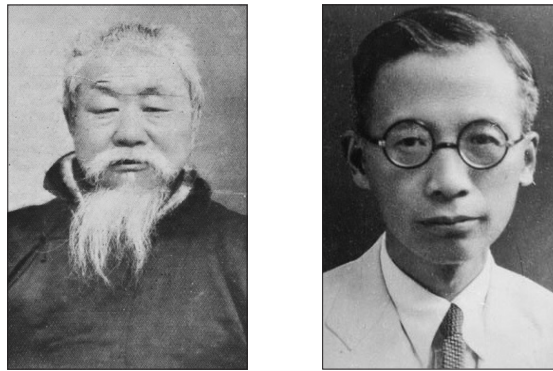
¹¹ Qin Qi et al., “1992 yilai guoneiwai diyuanzhengzhi bijiao yanjiu: Jiyu dilixue shijiao de fenxi” [A Comparative Study on Foreign and Chinese Geopolitical Studies since 1992: An Analysis from the Perspective of Geography], *Dilixue fazhan* 36, no. 12 (2017).

¹² Lu Dadao and Du Debin, “Guanyu jiaqiang diyuanzhengzhi diyuanjingji yanjiu de sikao” [Some Thoughts about Strengthening Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Research], *Acta Geographica Sinica* 68, no. 6 (2013).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Pan Zhongqi, “Diyuanxue de fazhan yu Zhongguo de diyuanzhanlüe: Yi zhong fenxi kuangjia” [The Development of Geopolitics and China’s Geostrategy: An Analytical Framework], *Guoji zhengzhi yanjiu*, no. 2 (2008).

FIGURE 1 Zhang Xiangwen and Zhu Kezhen



SOURCE: Wikimedia.org; and Wikipedia.org.

NOTE: Zhang Xiangwen (left), one of modern China's pioneer geographers, established the Geoscience Society of China in Tianjin in 1909. In 1934, Zhu Kezhen (right) founded the Geographical Society of China in Nanjing. The two organizations merged in 1950.

“the international financial crisis triggered by the United States has fundamentally changed the global political and economic landscape.”¹⁵ Whereas U.S. comprehensive national power had faced significant decline from 2000 to 2015, China's had continued to increase.¹⁶ Prominent scholars proclaimed that China's rise would end three centuries of Western global domination. Hence, it would not only change “the destiny of the Chinese people domestically” but also reshape the global allocation of strategic resources and the distribution of political power, as a consequence altering the overall future direction of humankind.¹⁷ China's geopolitical community would need to rise to the occasion: who else would be better equipped to deal with questions about the spatial effects of changes in the global political and economic order, the implications of the emerging bipolar structure, or the strategic directions China should take to break through Western containment?¹⁸

Taking this task to heart led to an impressive spike in geopolitics-related publications in the post-Cold War period. New research centers were established, and from a handful of pioneers such as Wang Enyong, Shen Weilie, and Ye Zicheng, the cohort of Chinese scholars interested in geopolitics kept expanding. Depth improved in parallel with the quantitative leap, from the initial groundwork in the 1990s identifying the basic concepts of classical and critical geopolitics to more recent treatises dissecting the evolution of Mackinder's thought,¹⁹ Spykman's influence over the

¹⁵ Hu Angang et al., “Daguo xingshuai yu Zhongguo jiyu: Guojia zonghe guoji pinggu” [The Rise and Fall of Great Powers and Opportunities for China: An Assessment of Comprehensive National Power], *Economic Herald*, no. 3 (2017).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Du Debin and Ma Yahua, “Zhongguo jueqi de guoji diyuanzhanlüe yanjiu” [Research on the International Geostrategy of China's Rise], *World Regional Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁸ Du Debin et al., “1990 nian yilai Zhongguo dilixue zhi diyuanzhengzhixue yanjiu jinzhhan” [Progress in Geopolitics of Chinese Geographical Research since 1990], *Dili yanjiu* 34, no. 2 (2015).

¹⁹ Jiang Shigong, “Diyuanzhengzhixue yanjiu yu shijie diguo de xingshuai: Cong ‘zhuangnian Maijinde’ dao ‘laonian Maijinde’” [Geopolitical Strategy and the Rise and Fall of World Empires: From “Mature Mackinder” to “Old Mackinder”], *Zhongguo zhengzhixue* 2 (2018).

theory of containment,²⁰ Carl Schmitt's concept of *Großraum*,²¹ the development of sea power and its relevance to China's strategic context,²² and a geostrategic interpretation of the "salt and iron" debate.²³ Some works eventually made it to the top political decision-making organs of the party-state.²⁴ (For further context, see **Appendix 1** and **Appendix 2**.)

Chinese academics initially had to go through serious cognitive contortions to invest in a field considered as toxic both because of its association with imperialism and because of its Western lineage ("Western" and "imperialist" being sometimes used interchangeably). At the same time, these scholars recognized its usefulness as a tool for rising great powers to think about the space they need to ensure their survival, development, and ability to shape their international environment—in other words, their strategic space. These ideas were difficult to reconcile with China's official commitment to "never seek hegemony, expansion, or sphere of influence" and to remain "a defender of world peace."²⁵ It is possible that the scientific claims of geopolitics and its emphasis on material conditions comported well with the Chinese scholars' Marxist creed or that under their internationalist veneer lay a more realist view of the nature of international relations. Whatever the case, they found a practical and patriotic purpose to their research: their work would serve national interests and strategic decision-making.²⁶ As the old bipolar world order was crumbling, as China's integration into the world was deepening and its rise continued, and as new transportation and communication technologies were reducing the protective effects of distance, the country had to use all available tools to face upcoming strategic challenges and start to "think globally."²⁷

If anything, the expansion of China's strategic mental map did not happen inadvertently. Chinese geopoliticians spent decades studying the influence of geopolitical thought on great powers' decision-making and global geostrategies, especially the United States. They scrutinized the patterns leading to the rise and demise of great powers, the reasons motivating their expansionist appetites, the profit they gained from their hegemonic prowess, the burdens empire

²⁰ Liu Xiaofeng, "Meiguo 'ezhi Zhongguo' lun de diyuanzhengzhixue tanyuan" [Exploring the Geopolitical Origins of the U.S. "China Containment" Theory], *Guowai lilun dongtai* 10 (2019).

²¹ Fang Xu, "Yi dakongjian zhixu gaobie pu shi diguo" [Saying Farewell to Universal Empire with a Greater Space Order], *Kaifang shidai* 4 (2018).

²² See the prolific writings of Zhang Wenmu, including his book *On Chinese Sea Power (Lun Zhongguo haiquan)* published in 2009 and his three-volume *China's National Security Strategy from a Global Perspective (Quanqiu shiye zhong de Zhongguo guojia anquan zhanlüe)* published in 2010.

²³ Wang Fenglong and Liu Yungang, "Lun Zhongguo gudai diyuanzhanlüe zhiding zhong de 'quanheng': Yi 'Yan Tie lun' wei li" [On "Weighing Cost-Benefit" in Ancient China's Geostrategic Making: The "Discourses on Salt and Iron" as a Case Study], *Dili kexue* 39, no. 9 (2019). The "Discourses on Salt and Iron" is the record of a debate held in 81 BCE (Han dynasty) over the establishment of state monopolies meant to bring new sources of income in order to, among other reasons, cover the cost of imperial expansion.

²⁴ Du Debin and his colleagues were consulted as subject matter experts on China's responses to issues related to maritime disputes and Japan's energy security dilemma. Their "expert consultation opinions" were sent to the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Office and the State Council's General Office. See Du et al., "1990 nian yilai Zhongguo dilixue zhi diyuanzhengzhixue yanjiu jinzhān."

²⁵ Qin Gang, "Implementing the Global Security Initiative to Solve the Security Challenges Facing Humanity" (speech, February 21, 2023), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230222_11029589.html. See also Xi Jinping's speech at the 20th National Party Congress in October 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/16/content_WS634b85a4c6d0a757729e1480.html; the PRC's 2019 defense white paper, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253236.htm; Hu Jintao's remarks in January 2011, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/video/2011-01/21/content_11895011.htm; Wen Jiabao's remarks in June 2004, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/99594.htm>; Jiang Zemin's speech at Harvard University in November 1997, <https://china.usc.edu/president-jiangs-speech-harvard-university-1997>; and Deng Xiaoping's speech to the UN General Assembly in April 1974, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1974/04/10.htm>.

²⁶ This function is acknowledged by a non-trivial number of scholars. See for example, Lu and Du, "Guanyu jiaqiang diyuanzhengzhi diyuanjingji yanjiu de sikao"; Ge, "Diyuanzhengzhi yanjiu de dangdai fuxing ji qi Zhongguo yiyi"; Ning An, Xiaomei Cai, and Hong Zhu, "Gaps in Chinese Geopolitical Research," *Political Geography* 59 (2017): 136–38; Hu Zhiding et al., "Weilai shinian Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhixue zhongdian yanjiu fangwen" [Key Research Directions in Chinese Geopolitics for the Next Decade], *Dili yanjiu* 36, no. 2 (2017); Li Hongmei, "Diyuanzhengzhi lilun yanbian de xin tedian ji dui Zhongguo diyuanzhanlüe de sikao" [New Characteristics of the Evolution of Geopolitical Theory and Some Thoughts on China's Geostrategy], *Guoji zhanwang* 6 (2017); and Qin et al., "1992 yilai guoneiwai diyuanzhengzhi bijiao yanjiu: jiyu dilixue shijiao de fenxi."

²⁷ Liu Miaolong, Kong Aili, and Tu Jianhua, "Diyuanzhengzhixue lilun, fangfa yu jiushi niandai de diyuanzhengzhixue" [Theory and Methods of Geopolitics and the Study of Geopolitics in the 1990s], *Human Geography* 10, no. 2 (1995).

imposed on them, and the catastrophic consequences of overextension. They also discovered geopolitics' practical value for the development of China's own grand strategies. As Pan Zhongqi explains, a thorough geopolitical analysis would constitute an important "guide" for the Chinese strategic community to "identify China's geostrategic goals, define China's geostrategic threats, and choose China's geostrategic means."²⁸

One is left to wonder about such an intense intellectual dedication, which could be interpreted as the behavior of suitors wooing the dark object of their desire. Of course, Chinese strategic elites never acknowledge they might be interested in finding tips about the best ways to achieve world domination to serve the purpose of "national rejuvenation." By their own admission, they are more prosaically willing to learn from others' "flaws and mistakes,"²⁹ effectively serve China's national development, ensure its national security, and "prevent the recurrence of historical tragedies."³⁰ The lessons they learned will be discussed in the following sections.

The Influence of Geopolitical Thinking on Western Powers' Grand Strategy

Chinese geopolitical scholars are interested in understanding the concepts and mechanisms of geopolitics not only as an intellectual device to help them analyze international relations patterns but also as a factor influencing, and even guiding, major countries' foreign strategic practice. Ge Hanwen, an associate professor at the National University of Defense Technology's PLA School of International Relations who has led a multiyear research project on the post-Cold War influence of geopolitical thinking on a set of countries,³¹ finds a direct connection between the revival of geopolitics as an academic discipline in the West and the execution of key strategies, such as the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and NATO enlargement policies.³² Hence, as one Renmin University professor writes, the "excitable minds" of Western strategists may be carried away by great-power chess games, but it still makes sense for their Chinese counterparts to "try to understand the geopolitical principles they rely on for their thinking."³³

The most prominent themes that emerge from the discussions that Chinese geopolitical scholars have conducted since the end of the Cold War are European imperialism and U.S. hegemony. The latter is usually understood as a subset or an extension of the former. There is a vast Chinese literature that studies the emergence of Western empires, examines the power transition between a declining Britain and a rising United States, and dissects the causes of the Soviet Union's collapse. As enlightening as these publications are, they are not as relevant for our current purpose. When they observe the challenges to the survival and development of their country, Chinese strategic elites perceive the United States as the most imminent and most significant threat. The following discussion therefore focuses on describing the lessons they draw from studying the geopolitical sources of U.S. international conduct.

²⁸ Pan, "Diyuanxue de fazhan yu Zhongguo de diyuanzhanlüe: Yi zhong fenxi kuangjia," 27.

²⁹ Wang Jisi, "Guanyu gouzhu Zhongguo guoji zhanlüe de jidian kanfa" [Some Views on Building China's International Strategy], *Studies of International Politics* 4 (2007).

³⁰ Hu et al., "Weilai shinian Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhixue zhongdian yanjiu fangwen."

³¹ See the 2012 National Social Sciences Foundation project "Research on Post-Cold War Development, Characteristics, and International Political Significance of Geopolitical Thought on World Countries" (reference 12CGJ022).

³² Ge, "Diyuanzhengzhi yanjiu de dangdai fuxing ji qi Zhongguo yiyi."

³³ Liu, "Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi."

Scholars first acknowledge that its “superior geographical position” has bestowed on the United States “intrinsic advantages in the geopolitical game.”³⁴ Its excellent natural and geographic endowments, combining long coastlines and a vast continental hinterland, provided the United States natural shelters from external economic and military threats in the early stages of its development as a great power and make it “stand out among the club of imperial countries such as Britain, France, and Russia.”³⁵ But the United States’ good fortune is also its misfortune: its geographic position forces the United States to defend two oceans and to constantly expand the definition of what constitutes its strategic space. By doing so, it burdens itself with the task of providing for the security of vital sea lanes around the world and collides with other powers’ “security frontiers.”³⁶

Second, Chinese authors ascribe U.S. international behavior and grand strategy to both cultural factors and the long-standing influence of geopolitical theoreticians.³⁷ These two factors can be difficult to dissociate, as they appear as two sides of the same coin: the drive for hegemony is conceived as something encoded in the West’s DNA, and geopolitics is an accessory to Western imperialist aggression. Shi Yinhong believes that the United States’ evangelical culture provided a “wellspring of U.S. world hegemonic mindset” and a fertile soil that contributed to its urge to seek global dominance.³⁸ According to Chongqing Party School analyst Fang Xu, Westerners’ fixation on spatial occupation colors not only how they understand the world but also how they interpret actions undertaken by others. Their inability to free themselves from this hegemonic lens has led some Western scholars to persist in regarding the Belt and Road Initiative “as China’s version of the Marshall Plan, a security strategy to strive for regional dominance, and accuse Chinese companies of ‘plundering resources’ and operating overseas spheres of influence in the name of BRI construction.”³⁹

The enduring influence of classical geopolitics on such hegemonic-leaning minds should come as no surprise, given its preoccupation with nation-states’ control over geographic spaces, key nodes, and resources, and the priority given to military means in achieving these aims.⁴⁰ Nicholas Spykman’s rimland theory, which introduced the idea of containment of peer competitors on the Eurasian continent through the control of its peripheral belt comprising East Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe, has continued to “guide the spatial layout of the U.S. military and diplomatic strategy”⁴¹ and to run through successive U.S. national security strategies since the end of World War II.⁴² Zbigniew Brzezinski’s “grand chessboard” concept is essentially the continuation into the post-Cold War period of Spykman’s vision. He shares with Spykman a

³⁴ Hu Wei, Hu Zhiding, and Ge Yuejing, “Zhongguo diyuan huanjing yanjiu jinzhan yu sikao” [Progress and Reflection on China’s Geo-environment Research], *Progress in Geography* 28, no. 4 (2019): 481.

³⁵ Song Tao, Lu Dadao, and Liang Yi, “Daguo jueqi de diyuanzhengzhi zhanlüe yanhua: Yi Meiguo wei li” [The Evolution of Great Powers’ Geostrategy during Their Rise: The United States as a Case Study], *Geographical Research* 36, no. 2 (2017): 216–18.

³⁶ Zhang Wenmu, “Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhi de tedian ji qi biandong guilü” [Characteristics and Changing Laws of Chinese Geopolitics], *Taipingyang xuebao* 21, no. 1 (2013).

³⁷ See, for example, Song, Lu, and Liang, “Daguo jueqi de diyuanzhengzhi zhanlüe yanhua,” 221–22; and Dai Peng, “Zhongguo zhoubian diyuanzhanlüe yanjiu” [Study of China’s Peripheral Geostrategy] (graduate thesis, PLA Information Engineering University, 2006).

³⁸ Shi, “Shijie xiandai shi shang de diyuanzhengzhi hongguan jili ji qi daguo guoyun xiaoying.”

³⁹ Fang, “Yi dakongjian zhixu gaobie pu shi diguo.”

⁴⁰ Wei Wenyong, Dai Juncheng, and Liu Yuli, “Diyuan wenhua zhanlüe yu guojia anquan zhanlüe gouxiang” [Geocultural Strategy and the Conceptualization of National Security Strategies], *World Regional Studies* 25, no. 6 (2016).

⁴¹ Song Tao et al., “Jin 20 nian guoji diyuanzhengzhixue de yanjiu jinzhan” [Twenty Years of Progress in the Study of International Geopolitics], *Acta Geographica Sinica* 71, no. 4 (2016).

⁴² Lu Junyuan, “Meiguo dui Hua diyuanzhanlüe yu Zhongguo heping fazhan” [America’s Geostrategy toward China and China’s Peaceful Development], *Human Geography* 21, no. 1 (2006).

similar goal of perpetuating American hegemony⁴³ and a persisting influence over U.S. grand strategy making.⁴⁴ Yesterday's containment of the Soviet Union and today's Indo-Pacific strategy are identical in both their aim and means: to uphold U.S. global dominance and prevent the emergence on the Eurasian continent of any state or political and economic alliance that may compete with the United States.⁴⁵

With the development of science and technology, the traditional focus of geopolitics on space as a three-dimensional physical realm (land, sea, air) has expanded to include a “virtual space” whose contours are delineated by economic, cultural, and informational factors, thereby broadening the scope of issues national security strategies need to address.⁴⁶ Classical geopolitics, with its emphasis on territorial expansion and the dichotomy between continental and maritime powers, has increasingly proved unconvincing, especially at a time of globalization-induced interdependence.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the formulation and implementation of U.S. national security strategies since the end of the Cold War have been increasingly heavily influenced by the introduction of cultural and civilizational elements into the geopolitical field, as epitomized by Samuel Huntington's 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Geographic blocs and alliances based on Cold War ideology are giving way to coalitions based on cultural identity, and “the fault lines between civilizations are becoming the central dividing lines of global political conflicts.”⁴⁸

Formulating Geopolitics “with Chinese Characteristics”

Having studied in detail the evolution of geopolitics since its emergence as a discipline and having established its value in understanding the foundation of past and current U.S. grand strategies, some Chinese scholars then proceeded, around a decade ago, to examine China's own tradition of geopolitical thought and its applicability to the making of a grand strategy fitting China's contemporary characteristics and requirements.

Those who chose to revert to China's pre-modern history to track homegrown geopolitical concepts had to face a few paradoxes. The immediate challenge was the need to overcome a peculiar form of historical revisionism: how could geopolitics be found in China centuries before it was even invented? In addition, ancient China was little concerned about conceptualizing the world outside the central plains where the *huaxia* culture was nested, beyond calling it indiscriminately the “barbarian” realm (*yi*).⁴⁹ Its conception of the world was that China was the world and encompassed “everything under heaven” (*tianxia*). Liu Yungang and Wang Fenglong acknowledge the limitations of an exercise that would try to “blindly transplant” spatial

⁴³ Du and Ma, “Zhongguo jueqi de guoji diyuanzhanlue yanjiu”; and Song et al., “Jin 20 nian guoji diyuanzhengzhixue de yanjiu jinzhuan.”

⁴⁴ Fang Xiaozhi, “Burejinsiji diyuanzhengzhi sixiang de zai quanshi” [A Reinterpretation of Brzezinski's Geopolitical Thought], in *Zhongguo zhoubian diyuan huanjing xin qushi: Lilun fenxi yu zhanlue yingdui* [New Trends in China's Peripheral Geo-environment: Theoretical Analysis and Strategic Responses], ed. Liu Ming (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), 49–64.

⁴⁵ Hu Zhiding and Wang Xuwen “Da guo diyuanzhanlue jiaohuiqu de shikong yanbian: Tezheng, guilü qi yuanyin” [Spatio-Temporal Evolution of Great Powers' Geostategic Confluence Zones: Characteristics, Patterns, and Causes], *Tropical Geography* 39, no. 6 (2019).

⁴⁶ Wei, Dai, and Liu, “Diyuan wenhua zhanlue yu guojia anquan zhanlue gouxiang.”

⁴⁷ Su Hao, “Diyuan zhongxin yu shijie zhengzhi de zhidian” [Center of Gravity and the Pivot of World Politics], *Contemporary International Relations* 4 (2004).

⁴⁸ Wei, Dai, and Liu, “Diyuan wenhua zhanlue yu guojia anquan zhanlue gouxiang.”

⁴⁹ Ge, “Diyuanzhengzhi yanjiu de dangdai fuxing ji qi Zhongguo yiyi”; and Liu, “Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi”

conceptions of the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties into the contemporary context.⁵⁰ At the same time, they attempt to identify Chinese equivalents of geopolitical concepts and find evidence of a rich geostrategic tradition. They discern parallels between the balance-of-power system in nineteenth-century Europe and China's Spring and Autumn (770–475 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods. Both were periods of intense competition for power between rival states, characterized by military and diplomatic maneuvering and the emergence of major military-strategic configurations such as “vertical alliances, horizontal coalitions” (*hezong lianheng*).⁵¹ Zheng Yongnian, former director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, identified the issue of borderlands as key in traditional Chinese geopolitics, which translated, according to Zheng, into a preference for passive defense rather than expansionism, for continental rather than maritime power, and for a focus on regional periphery rather than a global outlook. Zheng portrayed the tributary system as “the manifestation of China's geopolitics,” with its main goal being the stabilization of the periphery.⁵²

Other scholars associate the “birth of China's geopolitical consciousness” with Mao Zedong.⁵³ Liu Xiaofeng dates it back to Mao's August 1946 mention of the existence of a vast zone separating the United States and the Soviet Union,⁵⁴ which Liu claims, without further explanation other than “Mao's superior geopolitical wisdom,” is the “exact opposite” of Spykman's rimland theory.⁵⁵ Without judging whether his thought is “superior” or not, Mao does have a special place in Chinese modern geopolitics. As early as 1938, when China was in the throes of war against Japan and Chinese forces were “strategically encircled” by the enemy, the Communist Party leader was able to see beyond the immediate military battlefield and to apprehend the broader international politics at play on a global chessboard:

If the game of *weiqi* is extended to include the world, there is yet a third form of encirclement as between us and the enemy, namely, the interrelation between the front of aggression and the front of peace. The enemy encircles China, the Soviet Union, France and Czechoslovakia with his front of aggression, while we counter-encircle Germany, Japan and Italy with our front of peace.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Liu Yungang and Wang Fenglong, “Zhongguo gudai zhengzhi dili sixiang tanjiu” [An Exploration of Ancient Chinese Political Geography Thought], *Progress in Geography* 36, no. 12 (2017).

⁵¹ The phrase “vertical alliances, horizontal coalitions” refers to two contending strategies during the Warring States Period (from 5th century BCE to the unification of China under emperor Qin Shihuangdi in 221 BCE). Six kingdoms (Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, and Wei) were trying to cope with Qin's growing power and expansionism. Supporters of the “vertical alliance” along a north-south axis advocated an alliance among the six weaker states to balance against Qin, while supporters of the “horizontal coalition” advocated aligning with Qin along an east-west axis. Qin divided the contenders and conquered them one by one.

⁵² Zheng Yongnian, “Bianjiang, diyuanzhengzhi he Zhongguo de guoji guanxi yanjiu” [Borderlands, Geopolitics and China's International Relations], *Aisixiang*, July 29, 2012, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/55889.html>. See also Jiang Bin, “Zhongguo Gongchandang diyuanzhanlüe sixiang de lishixing sikao” [Historical Reflections on the Geostrategic Thinking of the Communist Party of China], *Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics* 2 (2012).

⁵³ Liu, “Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi.”

⁵⁴ Mao first mentioned the existence of such a “vast zone” during an interview with American reporter Anna Louise Strong: “The United States and the Soviet Union are separated by a vast zone which includes many capitalist, colonial and semi-colonial countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Before the U.S. reactionaries have subjugated these countries, an attack on the Soviet Union is out of the question.... True, these military bases are directed against the Soviet Union. At present, however, it is not the Soviet Union but the countries in which these military bases are located that are the first to suffer U.S. aggression. I believe it won't be long before these countries come to realize who is really oppressing them, the Soviet Union or the United States. The day will come when the U.S. reactionaries find themselves opposed by the people of the whole world.” The full interview transcript is available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/strong-anna-louise/1946/talkwithmao.htm>.

⁵⁵ Liu, “Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi.”

⁵⁶ Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War* (1938), available at https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

The “front of peace” gathering all anti-fascist “strategic units” would eventually form “a gigantic net” from which Japanese imperialism would not escape alive. In other words, Mao envisioned a global counter-encirclement strategy that ended up looking like a containment strategy.

Encirclement and counter-encirclement, interior and exterior lines, efforts to contain the expansion of imperialist powers, and other geopolitical configurations remained important themes in Mao’s strategic thinking long after the war against imperial Japan had ended. In a February 1973 meeting with Henry Kissinger and Winston Lord in Zhongnanhai, Mao mentioned the need to “draw a horizontal line” through the United States, Japan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe that would play a restraining role on the expansion of Soviet imperialism (see **Figure 2**).⁵⁷ Peking University professor Wang Jisi describes this “one line” (*yi tiao xian*) as China’s first geostrategic concept in the modern era, a concept that supplanted the prevailing Cold War bipolar division of the world into Eastern and Western camps because it envisioned the temporary alignment of China, technically a power of the “East,” with a major Western power in order to defeat the Soviet Union (back then, considered as the primary threat to China’s survival).⁵⁸

At the time of his wooing the two U.S. national security advisers, Mao had been including the United States in the same despised hegemonic camp as the Soviet Union for over a decade. In early 1974, he explained to Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda that the two superpowers could be overcome if China and the rest of the developing world created an international united front. In fact, the world was divided into three camps: the United States and the Soviet Union (hegemony seekers and “biggest international exploiters”) were in the first; Japan, Europe, Australia, and Canada (in various stages between the camps of oppressors of developing countries and countries oppressed by the superpowers’ bullying) were in the second; and Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including China and other oppressed nations at the forefront of the struggle against the superpowers, were in the third. Mao’s so-called Theory of the Three Worlds (see **Figure 3**) was officially introduced to the world by Deng Xiaoping during his speech at the United Nations in 1974.⁵⁹

Over a span of 35 years, Mao’s main objective was to resist powers whose expansion posed an existential threat to China’s strategic space. From facing Japan’s imperialism in the late 1930s and 1940s to facing the U.S. containment strategy since the 1950s and, in the aftermath of the 1960s Sino-Soviet split, facing Moscow’s “social-imperialism,” Mao’s geopolitical thinking was guided by the compelling need to free China from external aggression and encirclement. Although the “lines” and continental “vast areas” that he envisioned as ramparts against imperialism never came to pass, they are still worth pondering, both as embodiments of China-grown geopolitical thinking and as potential prototypes for future Chinese geostrategic configurations (see **Figure 4**).

⁵⁷ “Memorandum of Conversation between Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Henry Kissinger,” February 17, 1973, available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/memorandum-conversation-between-mao-zedong-zhou-enlai-and-henry-kissinger>. See also Gong Li, “‘Yi tiao xian’ gouxiang he huafen ‘sange shijie’ zhanlüe” [The “One Line” Concept and Division of the “Three Worlds” Strategy], National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, March 1, 2012, <http://www.nopss.gov.cn/GB/219470/17264676.html>.

⁵⁸ Wang Jisi, “Dongxinanbei, Zhongguo ju ‘zhong’: Yi zhong zhanlüe daqiu sikao” [East, West, South, North and China in the Middle: Pondering Over the Strategic Chessboard], *China International Strategy Review* (2013). In February 2015, Wang published an edited version of his article in English in the *American Interest*, entitled “China in the Middle,” <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/02/china-in-the-middle>.

⁵⁹ Deng Xiaoping (speech at the UN General Assembly, New York, April 10, 1974), available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1974/04/10.htm>.

FIGURE 2 Mao's "one horizontal line, one vast area"

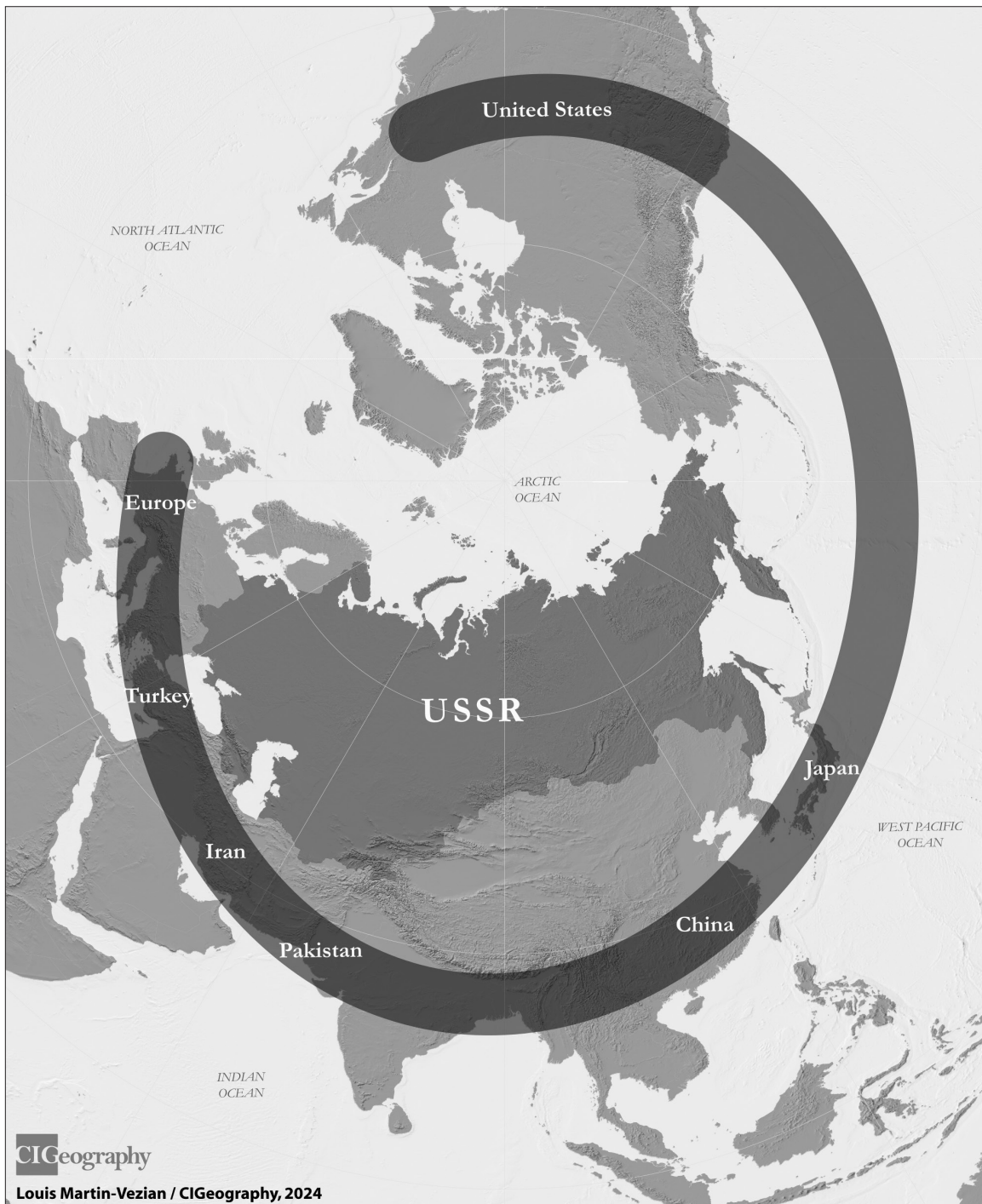


FIGURE 3 Mao's three worlds

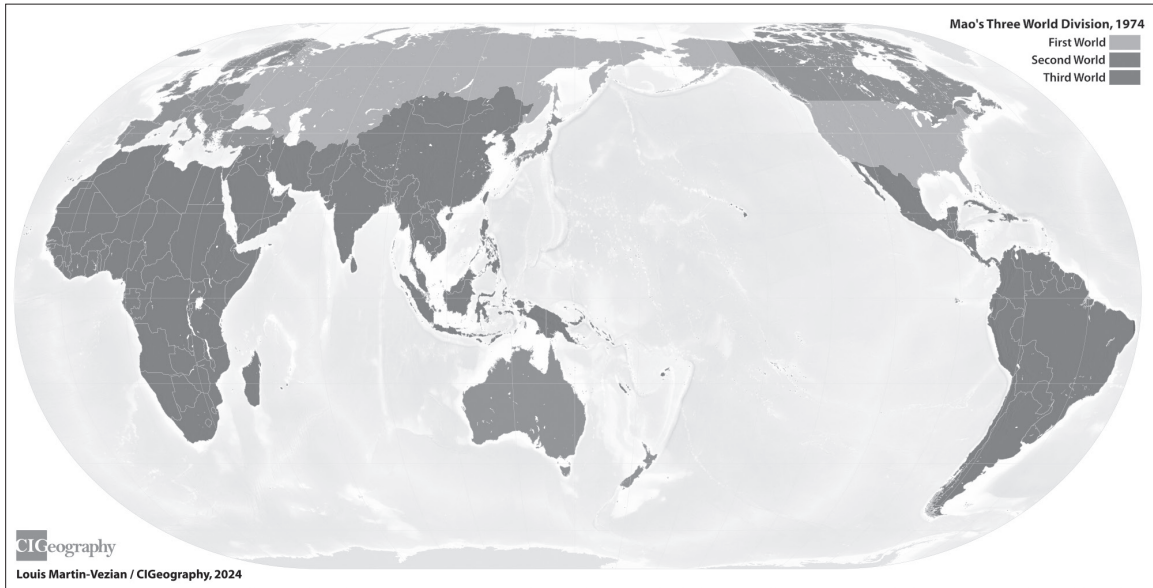


FIGURE 4 Chairman Mao in Beijing in 1967



SOURCE: World History Archive, Alamy Stock Photo.

Lessons Learned

As they embarked on their mission to study geopolitics, Chinese analysts emphasized the need for their work not to be confined exclusively to academic musings but to generate support for national policymaking. Geopolitics gives a sense of predictability, which can be comforting in times of perceived great geopolitical shifts and appreciable from a strategic planner's perspective. Although not all Chinese scholars make explicit inventories of lessons that would be applicable to China, some main themes emerge from their writings as they apply geopolitical lenses to survey their country's international security environment.

*"Only a handful of countries can truly become the center of the world."*⁶⁰ Together with Europe and the United States, China is one of the three major world political and economic plates that have their own "geophysical advantages, strategic depth, and vast 'living spaces.'"⁶¹ Its geographic location, at the east of Eurasia and to the west of the Pacific Ocean, lets China occupy a "dominant position on the Asian geographical plate" and stand as the "natural center" of Asia.⁶² Its exceptional topography, vast territory, ample room for maneuver, abundant resources, large population, "people able to endure hardship and work hard, and countless heroes," as well as its "national spirit that dares to prevail," make China not only Asia's center of gravity but the target of other powers' envy.⁶³ China is like "a piece of fatty meat," Mao said once, "everyone wants to take a bite at it."⁶⁴

Eurasia is the main springboard to world hegemony. Eurasia has been and will remain the focal region of great-power competition. Influenced by geopolitical theories, the United States never abandoned its grand strategy aiming at controlling Eurasia. Whether it translated in the past into Soviet containment or more recently into the Indo-Pacific strategy, the American hegemon has been pursuing the same set of objectives: preserving its global dominance and preventing the emergence of a competing power on the Eurasian continent, including through the use of its military alliance system.⁶⁵ As the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* notes:

For more than sixty years after the war, the United States consistently treated Western Europe and East Asia as its strategic bridgeheads, and treated the arc-shaped zone along the periphery of the Eurasian continent, from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia to South Asia to the Middle East to the Balkans, as a geopolitical battleground.⁶⁶

The U.S. containment of China is inevitable because its rise threatens U.S. hegemony, most of all on the Eurasian continent.⁶⁷ It would be "laughably naïve" to think this trend started in 2008 just "because someone declared that 'China is getting stronger.'"⁶⁸ Instead, the U.S. Department of Defense had already identified in the late 1980s the rise of China as the biggest future challenge

⁶⁰ Wang, "Dongxinanbei, Zhongguo ju 'zhong'"

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Zhang Wenmu, "Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhi de tedian ji qi biandong guilü."

⁶³ Jiang Yong, "Dili buru renhe, diyuan buji renyuan: Mao Zedong guojia anquan sixiang yanjiu" [A Favorable Location Is Not as Good as People at Peace, a Geoposition Is Not as Good as an Affinity with the People: A Study of Mao Zedong's National Security Thought], *Utopia*, November 29, 2021, <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/guofang/2021/11/445598.html>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hu and Wang, "Da guo diyuanzhanlue jiaohuiqu de shikong yanbian."

⁶⁶ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute.

⁶⁷ Du and Ma, "Zhongguo jueqi de guoji diyuanzhanlue yanjiu"; and Wang Enyong and Li Guicai, "Cong diyuanzhengzhixue kan Zhongguo de zhanlue taishi" [China's Strategic Situation from the Perspective of Geopolitics], *Renwen dili*, no. 1 (1990); and Dai, "Zhongguo zhoubian diyuanzhanlue yanjiu."

⁶⁸ Liu, "Guo zhi youhuan yu diyuanzhengzhi yishi"

to the United States, surpassing the threat posed by the Soviet Union.⁶⁹ The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review made it clear that the United States would actively squeeze China's strategic space, which it had started to do after the Cold War by expanding its "geostrategic encirclement of China's maritime environment" and by strengthening its "North and South anchors" (its alliance with Japan, South Korea, and Australia).⁷⁰

Having established the importance of thinking "in space" as a basis for the formulation of national grand strategies and the reordering of the world, the next step was "drawing China's geostrategic map"⁷¹ that would accompany the definition of the country's grand strategy and inform its future strategic direction. This required first determining China's position on the geopolitical chessboard. Does it belong to the continental or maritime powers category? What are the constraints on its strategic space? How can it break through these constraints? The next chapters will examine each of these questions in sequence and describe how China found its place in the world, both figuratively and literally.

⁶⁹ Liu Xiaofeng attributes this conclusion to a "strategic warning put forward by Andrew Marshall."

⁷⁰ Lu, "Meiguo dui Hua diyuanzhanlüe yu Zhongguo heping fazhan."

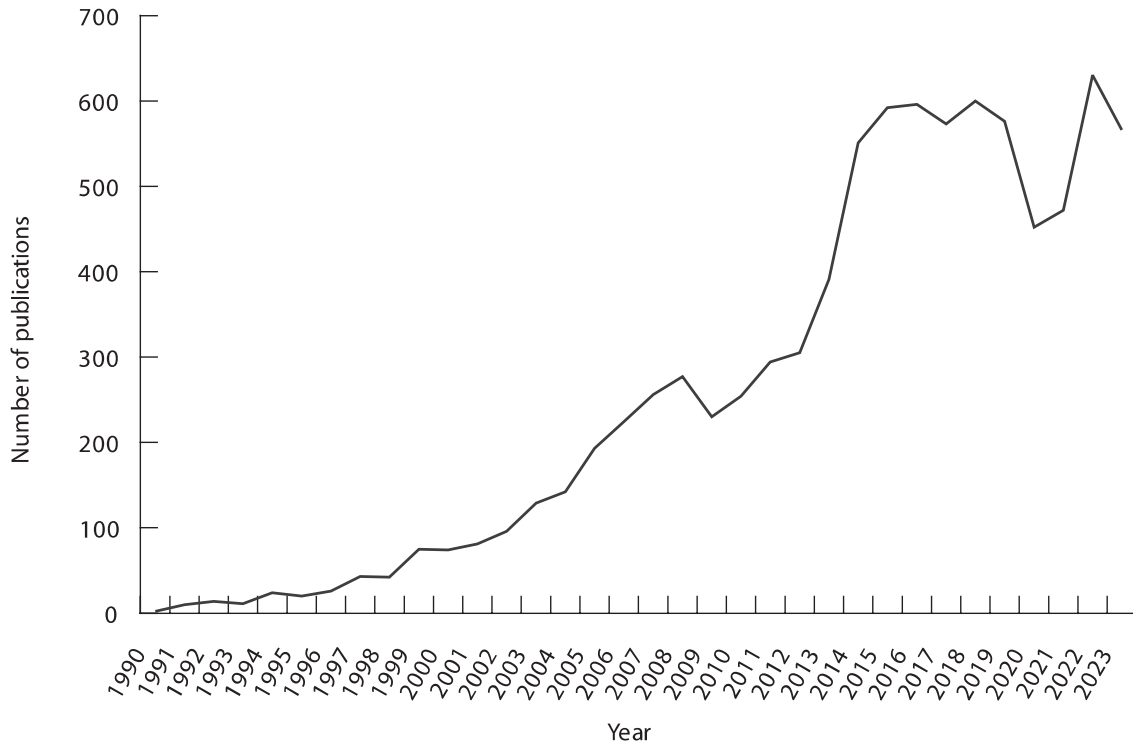
⁷¹ Song, Lu, and Liang, "Daguo jueqi de diyuanzhengzhi zhanlüe yanhua."

APPENDIX 1: GEOPOLITICS-RELATED CHINESE PUBLICATIONS SINCE 1990⁷²

Main Finding

The growing number of journal articles dedicated to geopolitics illustrate the Chinese intellectual elites' unabated investment in the field since the end of the Cold War.

FIGURE 1 Journal publications on geopolitics out of China, 1990–2023



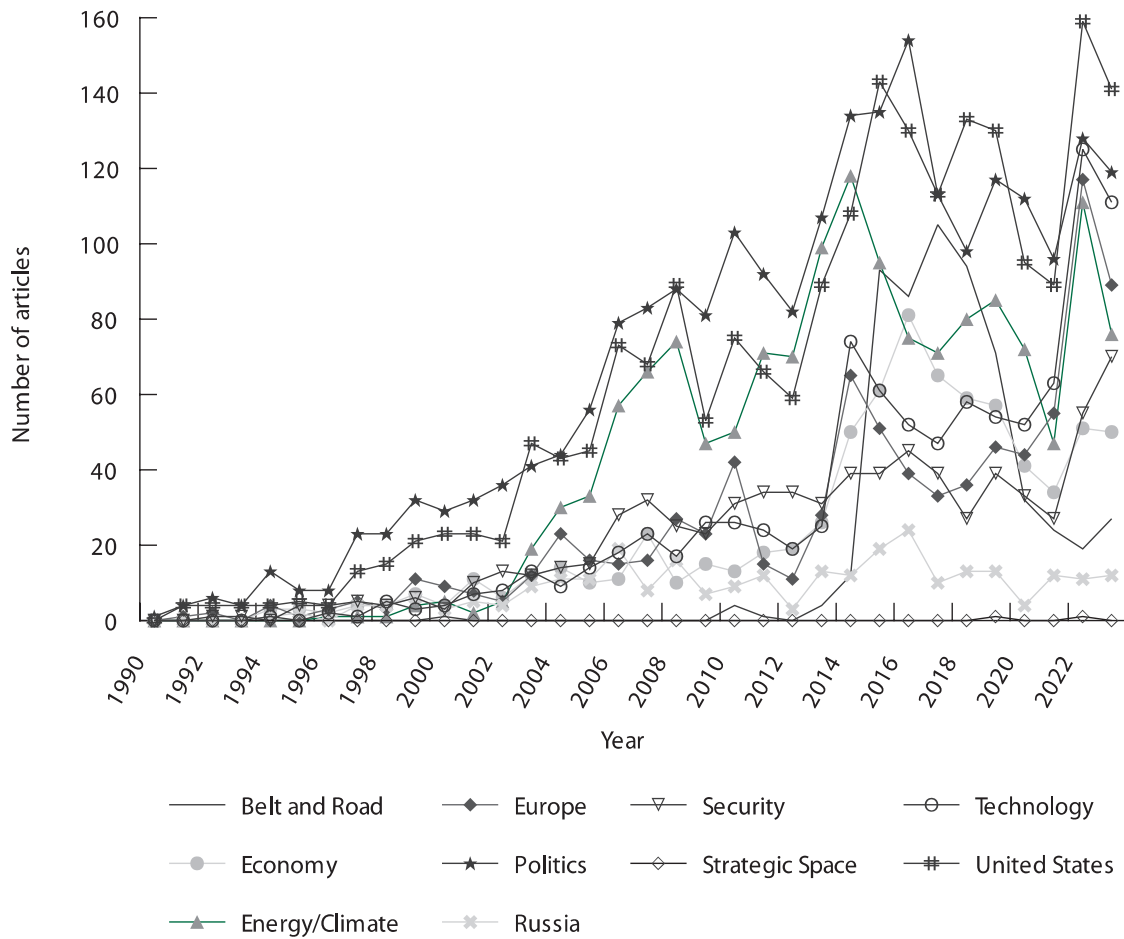
SOURCE: CNKI.

About the Data

Data used in this research was pulled from the journal database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) under the criteria of having “geopolitics” (地缘政治) as a subject and having been published between 1990 and 2024. This data serves as a sample of the population of articles published out of China, as the CNKI database does not include every publication.

⁷² Appendix 1 has been authored by Alayna Bone, a project associate with the Political and Security Affairs group at NBR.

FIGURE 2 Count of geopolitical articles out of China by topic and year



SOURCE: CNKI

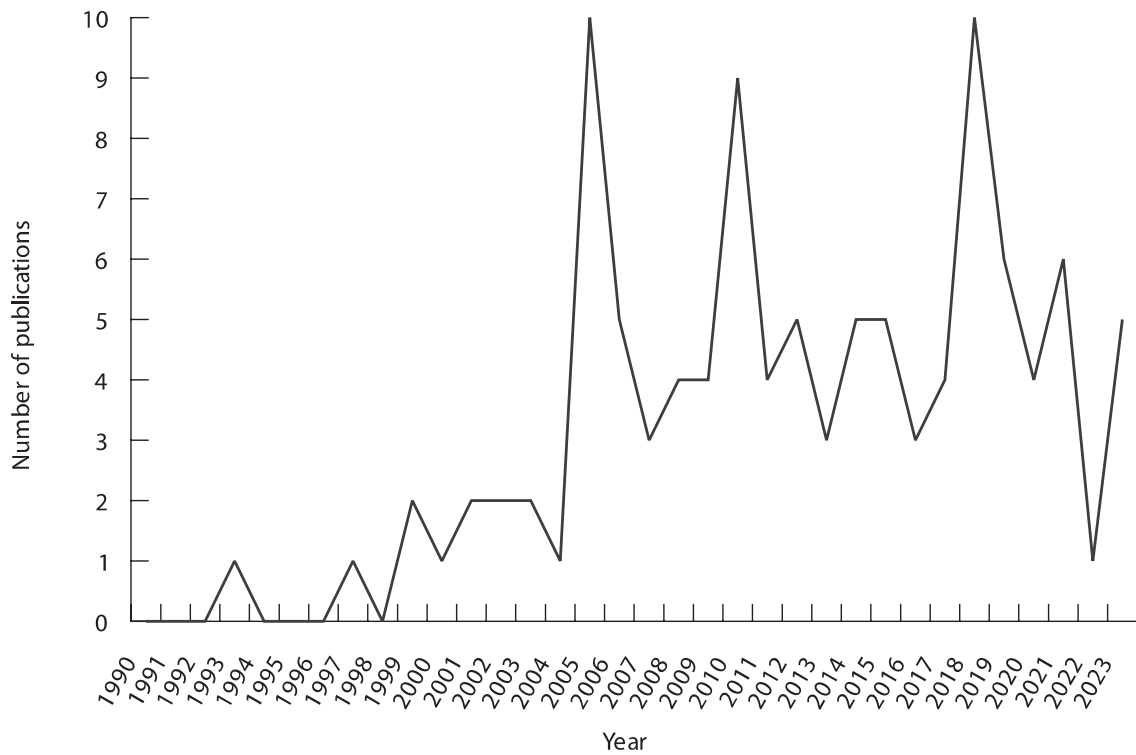
Data Observations and Findings

Institutions publishing on geopolitics in China include academic research institutions and think tanks, colleges, corporation-led research institutions and think tanks, social groups, and government-led research institutions and think tanks. Government-led research institutions, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) of the State Council and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) of the Ministry of State Security, make up the largest share of publishers on the topic. Top corporation-led research institutions publishing on geopolitics are affiliated with petroleum. Top universities publishing on geopolitics include Jilin University, East China Normal University, Yunnan University, Shanghai International Studies University, Heilongjiang University, and Beijing Foreign Language University. In many cases, top corporations and academic-led institutions publishing on geopolitics are doing so through journals co-administered with CASS and CICIR institutions. Many top publishing institutions

on geopolitics are loosely affiliated with the topic (i.e., the Institute of Geographical Sciences and Natural Resource Research of CASS and the Chinese Petroleum Society).

Articles on the United States, energy and climate, and technology make up the most common topics for publications in the database. Nearly all topics declined drastically in 2016, with some seeing further declines during later pre-pandemic years. Articles on the topic of “strategic space” (地緣政治) specifically experienced spikes between 2006 and 2018 before falling off in recent years.

FIGURE 3 Strategic space publications out of China, 1990–2023



SOURCE: CNKI.

APPENDIX 2: BUILDING CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL DISCIPLINE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Chinese scholars continue to face the inescapable tension between the foreign origins of geopolitics and its manifest usefulness to the development of China's own strategic thinking. The tension increased after Xi Jinping declared in May 2016 that philosophy and social sciences ought to be put "in the service of the Party and the people" and urged the Chinese academic community to build "philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics" that incorporate the country's socialist practices, Marxism, Chinese traditions, and other schools of thought.⁷³

In May 2019, a group of up-and-coming geopoliticians gathered at Shanghai's East China Normal University to discuss the challenges faced by the development of a Chinese school of geopolitics. In a joint article they published a few months later,⁷⁴ they declared that "foreign concepts and theories of political geography and geopolitics, mainly Western, provide a good reference and foundation for the development of political geography and geopolitics in China.... Many Western geopolitical theories have also had a profound impact on the Chinese government's diplomatic and military decisions, as well as on the people's understanding of the world's political geography." However, the rising scholars were also aware of the risks of developing a discipline that would "rely excessively on Western research frameworks and theories." Since these were born out of British and American sociopolitical contexts, they did not perfectly serve the need to build a theoretical framework for a country with a "special political system and cultural background, tremendous social and economic changes over the past 40 years of reform and opening, faced by complex international relations, and by the demands of China's peaceful rise, 'going out,' and national rejuvenation." Either banishing everything Western or considering China's special features as completely unique are both useless extremes.

The group of scholars ended up reaching a middle ground. Because the field of Chinese geopolitics is still in its "toddler" stage, "Western political geography and geopolitics should not be blindly worshipped, nor abandoned," but continue to serve as a reference, and some of its "excellent achievements" should be incorporated. At the same time, Chinese geopolitics should strive to develop its own theories, characteristics, and original contributions, including, for example, by actively exploring "China's contemporary and ancient political geography thoughts." In addition, Chinese geopolitics "should follow the path of science" and "try to avoid the simple analytical routine" that treats China as an applied case study of Western theory.

Finally, Western geopolitics, being currently dominated by critical geopolitics, is faced with challenges that China's rising scholars wish to avoid: research disconnected from reality, the declining social influence of the discipline, and theoretical discussions lacking consensus. Instead, the younger generation emphasizes the need for Chinese geopolitics to be connected to real-world issues and to provide strategic foresight and practical judgments to policymakers—not only in support of decisions already made but also in order to avoid future pitfalls and help formulate future national strategies.

⁷³ "Xi Stresses Chinese Characteristics in Philosophy, Social Sciences," Xinhua, May 17, 2016, available at http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2016-05/17/content_38473810.htm.

⁷⁴ Hu Zhiding et al., "Yang nengfou wei Zhong yong? Xifang zhengzhidili yu diyuanzhengzhi fazhan de jiejian yu fansi" [Can Foreign Theories Be Used in China? Reflections and References on the Development of Western Political Geography and Geopolitics], *Geographical Research* 39, no. 2 (2020): 217–31.

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CHAPTER 3

“Positioning” China: Power and Identity

Rather than being determined by geography, a state's geostrategy is mainly influenced by political factors. Political forces use geography to explain why and how the state thinks of directing resources, and how it exercises power. Power, or at least the self-perception of power, is the most fundamental factor that shapes a state's mental map, observes Jakub Grygiel: "A polity endowed with geopolitical heft will naturally cast a wider look at the world, whereas a state with scarce resources will focus on its immediate neighborhood and borders. One definition of a great power is a state with interests, and the ability to influence the geopolitical dynamics, beyond its borders."¹ Great powers "broaden their geostrategic vision because of a conscious decision, not in a moment of absentmindedness."² There is no such thing as inadvertent empires; they are the result of "deliberate, largely self-interested choices" of decision-makers.³

China's broadening conceptualization of its strategic space coincides with the growth of its national power. This process has been accompanied by a sustained collective effort stretching over several decades during which political and intellectual elites have been transfixed by the concept of power. How to define it, how to quantify it, what it consists of, and how much of it China holds in comparison with other countries were all issues investigated by Chinese strategists long before their foreign counterparts began asking "whither China."⁴ Viewed from the outside, China's assessment and acknowledgment of its national power has been a deliberate and incremental process of maturation involving academic, political, and military analysts and practitioners. Multiple interlocking discussions have occurred since the end of the Cold War, with a visible spurt starting at the turn of the century. During the following "golden decade" (see **Figure 1**), the government and academic strategic community wrestled with major issues pertaining to China's power and identity, such as the constituting elements of power, the definition of core interests, success and failures of past rising powers, and the imperative of becoming a maritime power for candidates aspiring to great-power status. The task of assessing the specifics of where China should go could only be tackled once the broader question of where China stands had been addressed. On the eve of Xi Jinping's accession to the Chinese Communist Party's commanding heights, the collective judgment on this deceptively simple question can be summarized as follows: China is a rising power, a composite land-sea country, which must become a maritime power. This chapter will pull apart the interwoven discussions that led to this conclusion, before examining in chapter 4 the strategic community's response to the next logical question: What should be China's strategic direction?

Assessing China's Power

On the question of power, People's Liberation Army officers appear, here too, as key thought leaders breaking ground for the rest of the Chinese intellectual community. In the early 1990s, military researchers from the strategic studies department of the Academy of Military Sciences led by Senior Colonel Huang Shuofeng developed extensive index systems and equations to

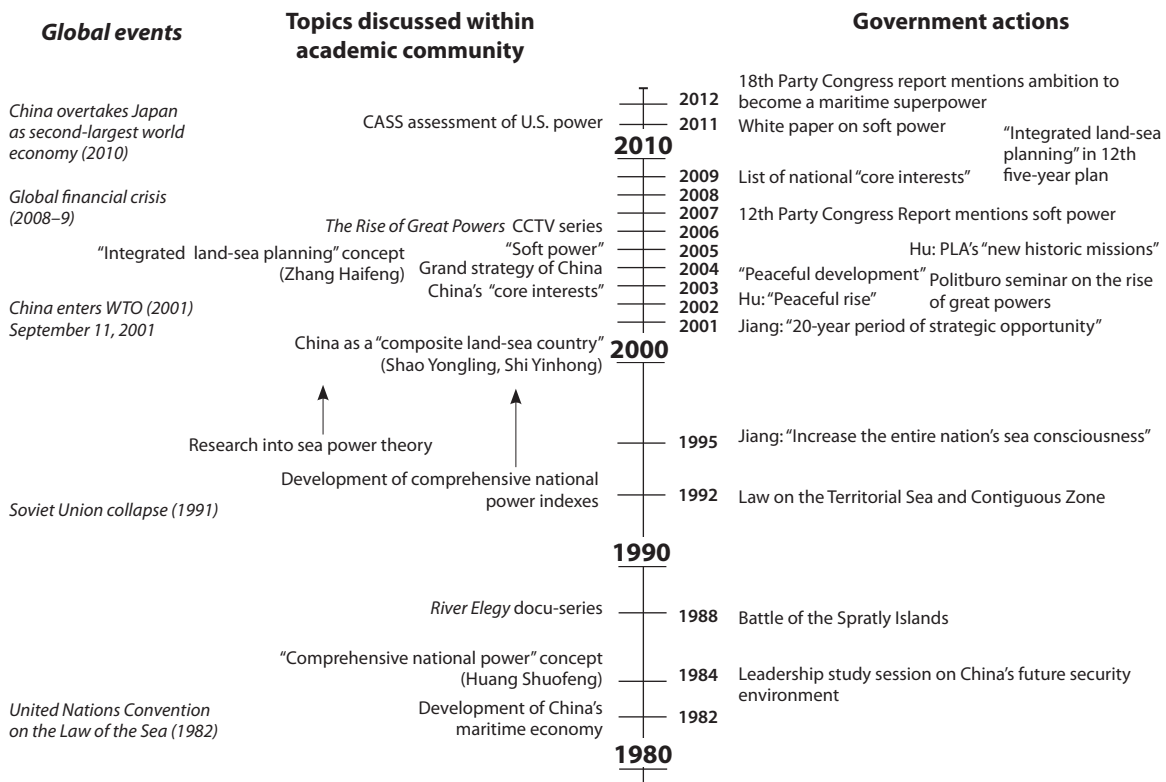
¹ Jakub Grygiel, "How Land and Sea Powers Look at the Map," National Bureau of Asian Research, Mapping China's Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/how-land-and-sea-powers-look-at-the-map>.

² Ibid.

³ Andrew Moravcsik, review of John Darwin's *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830–1970*, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

⁴ Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" (remarks to National Committee on U.S.–China Relations, New York, September 21, 2005), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

FIGURE 1 The “golden decade” of PRC research on power



assess and compare the comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*) of different countries in the world, including China.⁵ Acknowledging that military strength is but one element determining a country’s ability to prevail in international competition,⁶ Huang introduced the idea of aggregating a variety of factors, both material and immaterial, during a 1984 study session ordered by Deng Xiaoping to assess China’s future security environment up to the dawn of the 21st century.⁷ Deng understood the crucial importance of developing China’s material power, for both domestic and international reasons, and he heretofore made this the cornerstone of his grand strategy. Thus, in late 1992, while in Zhejiang, he enjoined his comrades to “seize the opportunity to develop ourselves and constantly improve our comprehensive national power.”⁸

Throughout the following decades, Chinese researchers in both academia and government continued to dedicate large portions of their time and intellectual energy to assessing China’s national power and comparing it to the world’s top great powers. Researchers under Wang

⁵ Wu Chunqiu, “Zonghe guoli lun jiqi dui woguo fazhan zhanlüe de qidi” [On Comprehensive National Power Theory and Its Lessons for China’s Development Strategy], *Guoji jishu jingji yanjiu xuebao*, no. 4 (1989); Huang Shuofeng, *Zonghe guoli lun* [Comprehensive National Power Theory] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1992); and *Da jiaoliang: Guoli qiuli lun* [The Great Combat: National Power and Global Power] (Hunan: Hunan Press, 1992).

⁶ Xu Jin and Li Wei, *Gaige kaifang yilai Zhongguo duiwai zhengce bianqian yanjiu* [Research on the Changes of China’s Foreign Policy since the Reform and Opening Up] (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2017), chap. 5.

⁷ Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2000).

⁸ Ni Degang, “Deng Xiaoping nanfang tanhua hou de liangci tanhua” [Deng Xiaoping’s Two Post-Southern Tour Conversations], *Study Times*, July 4, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0704/c69113-25238730.html>.

Songfen's leadership of the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences (CASS),⁹ academics at Tsinghua University,¹⁰ the Comprehensive National Power research group of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR),¹¹ and another dedicated research group within China's National Bureau of Statistics¹² each used their own set of indicators, parameters, and calculations in order to situate China relative to other great powers.¹³ Their conclusions differed on the timeline for China surpassing the United States in aggregate power,¹⁴ but their evaluations converged on its overall upward trajectory and ever narrowing power gap with the world's leading nation.¹⁵ This perception was confirmed after the turn of the century and again after China overtook Japan as the second-largest world economy in 2010.

In addition to the quantification of China's national power, the first decade of the 21st century saw an increased collective interest in studying power in all its facets and dimensions. Jiang Zemin had announced at the 16th Party Congress held in 2002 that "the first two decades of the 21st century are a period of important strategic opportunities, which we must seize tightly, and which offers bright prospects."¹⁶ The official recognition of China's new status as a rising power, first expressed in late 2003 in the form of the "peaceful rise" slogan (soon dropped in favor of the blander "peaceful development" formulation), was immediately followed by a series of overlapping discussions revolving around power and its applications.¹⁷ Chinese scholars began to wrestle with the definition of China's national "core interests" and the question of how to be more proactive in asserting and defending them.¹⁸ This discussion continued even after the leadership officially issued

⁹ Wang Songfen, *Shijie zhuyao guojia zonghe guoli bijiao yanjiu* [Comparative Study of Comprehensive National Power of the World's Major Countries] (Changsha: Hunan Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Yan Xuetong, Yu Xiaoqiu, and Tao Jian, "Dangqian woguo wajiao mianlin de tiaozhan he renwu" [Challenges and Tasks China Faces in Current Foreign Affairs], *World Economy and Politics*, no. 4, 1993; Hu Angang and Men Honghua, "Zhong Mei Ri E Yin zonghe shili de guoji bijiao (1980–1998 nian)" [International Comparisons of the Comprehensive National Powers of China, the United States, Japan, Russia, and India (1980–1998)], *Strategy and Management*, no. 2 (2002); and Hu Angang, Zheng Yufeng, and Gao Yuning, "Dui Zhong Mei zonghe guoli de pinggu (1990–2013 nian)" [Assessment of the Comprehensive National Power of China and the United States (1990–2013)], *Journal of Tsinghua University* 30, no. 1 (2015).

¹¹ "Quanwei baogao cheng, Zhongguo zonghe guoli paiming shijie di qi" [Authoritative Report Says China's Comprehensive National Power Ranks Seventh in the World], *China News*, September 12, 2000, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/2000-09-12/26/46039.html>.

¹² "Li Qiang zhuchi zhakai 'Shijie zhuyao guojia zonghe guoli pingjia yanjiu' keti jieti pingshen hui" [Li Qiang Presided Over the Final Review of the "Research on Evaluating the Comprehensive National Power of World Great Powers" Project], National Bureau of Statistics, November 17, 2014, http://csr.stats.gov.cn/kydt/kykx/201411/t20141117_2005.html.

¹³ For more about Chinese academic discussions related to the Comprehensive National Power research group, see David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 20–25; and Qi Haixia, "From Comprehensive National Power to Soft Power: A Study of the Chinese Scholars' Perception of Power," Griffith-Tsinghua Project, "How China Sees the World," Working Paper Series, no. 7, 2017.

¹⁴ Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China and Its Power Status," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1, 2006. For the Chinese version, see "Zhongguo jueqi de shili diwei" [China's Rising Power Position], *Science of International Politics*, no. 2 (2005).

¹⁵ Hu, Zheng, and Gao, "Dui Zhong Mei zonghe guoli de pinggu (1990–2013 nian)."

¹⁶ "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at the 16th Party Congress," *Xinhua*, November 17, 2002. For more about Chinese perceptions of strategic opportunities and challenges, see Timothy R. Heath, "The End of China's Period of Strategic Opportunity: Limited Opportunities, More Dangers," NBR, Mapping China's Strategic Space, December 19, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-end-of-chinas-period-of-strategic-opportunity-limited-opportunities-more-dangers>.

¹⁷ Robert L. Suettinger, "The Rise and Descent of 'Peaceful Rise,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, Fall 2004, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/clm12_rs.pdf. For an in-depth description of the "peaceful rise" concept as an influence operation orchestrated by the Ministry of State Security, see Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World* (Richmond: Hardie Grant, 2022), 97–112.

¹⁸ Earlier academic efforts to define China's national interests can be traced back to Yan Xuetong, *Zhongguo guojia liyi fenxi* [Analysis of China's National Interests] (Tianjin: Tianjin Publishing House, 1996); and Wang Yizhou "Guojia liyi zai sikao" [Rethinking National Interests], *Chinese Social Sciences*, no. 2 (2002). For overviews of the discussions, see Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, Winter 2011; and Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao, and Shaun Breslin, "Securing China's Core Interests: The State of the Debate in China," *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2015): 245–66.

and commentators.”²⁴ In the first decade of the new century, and even more so after the global financial crisis and following China overtaking Japan as the second-largest world economy in 2010, no one seemed to have any doubt about the basic fact that China was rising. But was it a regional or world power? A developing or developed country? A status quo or revisionist power? Put simply, was China a great power? When addressing these questions, most scholars still “held an equivocal view, acknowledging both the growth and weakness of...Chinese power.”²⁵ Many of them remained cautious and recommended that China continue to abide by Deng’s advice to “keep a low profile” for fear of provoking counter responses. Analysts of its “positioning” cautiously concluded that China was a developing, still relatively backward, regional, major, powerful player, with some global influence.²⁶ Their assessment of China’s position on the world stage reflected the country’s imperfect transformation into a world power, still caught in its old chrysalis but already showing unquestionable signs of an ability to unfurl its wings.

The Maritime Expanse as China’s “Ultimate Frontier”

Whereas China’s position on the global geopolitical chessboard can be subject to debate and evolve over time, positioning the country geographically should be straightforward enough: it is a continental power located in the eastern part of Eurasia, with a territory only second in size to Russia’s and an 18,000-kilometer coastline, ranking fourth in the world in total length and bordered by four seas—the Bohai, Yellow, East China, and South China Seas. China claims an additional 3 million square kilometers of maritime territory, including over 6,500 coastal islands, most of which are within 100 nautical miles of the mainland.²⁷

Yet geography is not necessarily destiny. For most of its history, China turned its back to the sea, and in the modern period, it did not start considering the maritime expanse more systematically as an area of geostrategic significance until the early 1980s. Extensive geophysical surveys in the Yellow and East China Seas conducted under the direction of the United Nations in the late 1960s indicating the presence of rich oil and hydrocarbon deposits had awakened Beijing’s interest in potentially exploiting marine resources. But it was the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that catalyzed Beijing’s desire to claim exclusive economic zones and continental shelves as potential additional territory over which to exert its sovereign rights. In the early 1980s, the State Oceanic Administration and CASS supported the organization of expert conferences on

²⁴ Wang Jisi, “Zhongguo de guoji dingwei wenti yu ‘taoguangyangui, yousuozuowei’ de zhanlüe sixiang” [The Problem of China’s International Positioning and the ‘Hide and Bide’ Strategic Thought], *International Studies* 2 (2011).

²⁵ Wei Huang, “From Reservation to Ambiguity: Academic Debates and China’s Diplomatic Strategy under Hu’s Leadership,” *East Asia* 32, no. 1 (2015): 69.

²⁶ See, for example, Cai Tuo, “Dangdai Zhongguo guoji dingwei de ruogan sikao” [Some Reflections on Contemporary China’s International Positioning], *Chinese Social Sciences* 5 (2010); Zhao Kejin, “Zhongguo mianlin guoji dingwei de chongxin xuanze” [China is Facing a New Choice for International Positioning], *Chinese Social Sciences* 5 (2009); Cai Tuo, “Dangdai Zhongguo de dingwei yu zhanlüe linian” [Positioning and Strategic Concept of Contemporary China], *Contemporary International Relations* 9 (2008); Shen Guofang et al., “Zhongguo shi ge ‘dagu’ ma?” [Is China a “Great Power?”], *World Knowledge* 1, (2007); Wei, “Zhuanxingqi Zhongguo guojia shenfen renting de kunjing”; and Wang, “Zhongguo muqian yi dingwei wei fuzeren fazhanzhong daguo.”

²⁷ Xiao Xing, “Haiyang zai Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhi zhong de zuoyong” [The Oceans’ Role in China’s Geopolitics], *Renwen dili* 17, no. 1 (1992); Zhang Yaoguang, “Zhongguo de haijiang yu woguo haiyang diyuanzhengzhi zhanlüe” [China’s Maritime Frontier and National Maritime Geopolitical Strategy], *Renwen dili* 11, no. 2 (1996); Kong Xiaohui, “Zhongguo zuowei luhai fuhé guojia de diyuanzhanlüe xuanze” [China’s Geostrategic Choices as a Continental-Maritime Composite Country], *Journal of the University of International Relations*, no. 2 (2008); and Cai Anning et al., “Jiyu kongjian shijian de luhai tongchou zhanlüe sikao” [Reflections on the Land-Sea Overall Strategy from a Spatial Perspective], *World Regional Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012).

the development of China's maritime economy.²⁸ As the country began to turn to an export-led economic model, General Liu Huaqing, a military commander who led the PLA Navy from 1982 to 1988, used the expansion of China's maritime frontiers as a justification for reallocating resources away from the land forces and to the navy. Liu oversaw the PLA Navy's modernization and foresaw its future expansion beyond the country's coastal waters and the so-called "island chains" constraining China's access to the Pacific Ocean on its eastern flank (see **Figure 2**).²⁹

The oceans quickly became perceived as an "ultimate frontier" (*zuihou bianjiang*) for China: crucial as transportation arteries, being potential providers of food, energy, and mineral resources, and imperative for military power projection and nuclear second-strike capabilities, they were imperfectly conquered by humankind and vigorously contested by powers eager to "occupy new vital spaces,"³⁰ including China itself. Today, China's desire to expand its strategic space is nowhere more evident than in the maritime domain. Its incremental seaward turn sealed its positioning as a global power. As Renmin University professor of international politics Wu Zhengyu writes, the development of sea power is inextricably linked to exerting global influence, which also means that "if a country seeks to pursue a world power or world leader status, or even global hegemony, then mastering sea power may be the way to go."³¹

For Andrew Rhodes, China's budding maritime identity arrived at a crossroads in 1988, when the sea inadvertently became the symbol of two radically different visions for the future of the country:

A decade after the launch of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, the movement that sought democratic political reforms and a new Chinese culture was developing powerful momentum and ties to the outside world—only to meet tragic suppression a year later at Tiananmen Square. At the same time, the PLA, and the PLAN in particular, was in the midst of its own reform and new engagement on the global stage.³²

Whereas the enthusiastically pro-reform TV series *River Elegy* (*He shang*) used the oceans as a representation of progress, freedom, and openness to the world, the military skirmishes over the Spratly Islands involving the PLA displayed a nationalist side that considered the oceans as a contested space that China had to secure for itself.

The conflation of geography and politics was again on full display in 1996. In the run-up to Taiwan's first presidential election in March 1996, the PLA launched large-scale exercises that included the firing of ballistic missiles and the simulation of an amphibious assault, which were met with the deployment of two U.S. carrier battle groups to waters off Taiwan.³³ The crisis injected a new dose of nationalism into domestic politics and reshaped the debate over maritime power in favor of hard-liners and the PLA Navy. Four months later, nationalist, anti-U.S., and anti-Japan

²⁸ Chen Wanling, "Haiyang jingjixue lilun tixi de tantao" [Discussing the Theoretical System of Maritime Economics], *Maritime Economy*, no. 3 (2001): 18–21, http://www.haiyangkaifayuguanli.com/ch/reader/download_pdf_file.aspx?journal_id=hykfygl&file_name=A8D77C701D04C881492B6AA85DE36B0C29CCBDDFFDCE02FB9F6E3A2F920389BF5E0D74DBF52B6660B1D16C0C40210D53&open_type=self&file_no=010304.

²⁹ Andrew S. Erickson, "Geography Matters, Time Collides: Mapping China's Maritime Strategic Space under Xi," NBR, Mapping China's Strategic Space, August 1, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/geography-matters-time-collides-mapping-chinas-maritime-strategic-space-under-xi/>.

³⁰ Xiao, "Haiyang zai Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhi zhong de zuoyong."

³¹ Wu Zhengyu, "Haiquan yu luquan fuhexing qiangguo" [Sea and Land Composite Powers], *World Economy and Politics*, no. 2 (2012).

³² Andrew Rhodes, "The 1988 Blues: Admirals, Activists, and the Development of the Chinese Maritime Identity," *Naval War College Review* 74, no. 2 (2021): 67.

³³ Nadège Rolland, "U.S.-China Relations: A Lingering Crisis," in *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, ed. Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin, and Sharon Strange (Acton: ANU Press, 2021), 190–203, available at https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n8254/pdf/07_chapter.pdf.

FIGURE 2 The island chains



sentiments flared up again as groups of “angry youths” (*fenqing*) and military commentators attacked the “revival of Japanese militarism” after right-wing sympathizers from the Nihon Seinensha (Japan Youth Federation) travelled to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to renovate a lighthouse.³⁴ Anti-Japanese demonstrators took to the streets, following in the footsteps of the late 1970s Defend Diaoyutai Movement (*Baodiao*, or *Baowei Diaoyutai yundong*) that erupted in the United States, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as “a grassroots crusade against a perceived plot by Japan and the U.S. to encroach on the Chinese territory” of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.³⁵ As a response, the Chinese political leadership sought to minimize the potential damage to its

³⁴ Phil Deans, “Contending Nationalisms and the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Dispute,” *Security Dialogue* 31, no. 1 (2000): 119–31.

³⁵ Robert Y. Eng, “The Intractability of the Sino-Japanese Senkaku/Diaoyu Territorial Dispute: Historical Memory, People’s Diplomacy and Transnational Activism, 1961–1978,” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, November 15, 2017, <https://apjif.org/2017/22/eng>.

relations with Tokyo, as well as its own legitimacy, and “treated the issue with great care.”³⁶ The convergence of nationalism and geography, which materialized in plain sight at that critical juncture, continues to shape the geopolitical arguments and strategic thinking occurring in China almost three decades later.

Summoning China’s “Sea Consciousness”

In addition to self-evident economic and military factors, China’s decision to turn seaward was accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. With China freed from the threat that its former Soviet neighbor once posed on its northern flank, and having settled most of its land borders, China’s security environment had now “eased on land,” prompting the gradual reorientation of its strategic priorities toward the sea in search of “further development space.”³⁷ China’s maritime surroundings provide “the way out for the continued survival and prosperity of the Chinese nation,” noted a Chinese geographer in 1992, and effectively controlling these waters “would greatly enhance our comprehensive national power and strengthen our political position in the Asia-Pacific region, and even in the world.”³⁸ The early 1990s witnessed a “resurgence of research on sea-power theory.”³⁹ The government introduced the Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone in February 1992, laying claim to the South China Sea. Academic journals and news media began publishing articles that called for China to increase its “sea consciousness,” echoing Jiang Zemin’s declaration during his 1995 inspection of a PLA Navy unit in Hainan: “Developing and using the sea will have more and more significance to China’s long-term development. We certainly need to understand the sea from a strategic highpoint, and increase the entire nation’s sea consciousness.”⁴⁰ Lively internal debates about sea power ensued among strategic analysts. At the turn of the century, they were broadly divided between those who advocated for China to become a fully fledged sea power, those who backed the development of both land and sea power, and those who pushed for China to become a land power with some naval capabilities, but not a fully fledged maritime nation.⁴¹

The political leadership, recognizing both the military and economic value of the oceans, decided in favor of aggregating all these options. Hu Jintao’s 2004 call for the PLA to take on “new historic missions” redefined the Chinese navy’s operational scope beyond the coastal “near seas” and justified naval engagement in “distant seas” missions.⁴² That same year, Zhang Haifeng, the former director of the State Oceanic Administration’s political department and a PLA Naval Academy instructor, put forward the concept of fully integrated land and sea planning (*luhai tongchou*), merging the two spaces into a “single map” in support of the national economy

³⁶ Deans, “Contending Nationalisms and the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Dispute.”

³⁷ Zheng Yiwei, “Luhai fuhexing Zhongguo ‘haiyang qiangguo’ zhanlüe fenxi” [Analysis of China’s “Strong Maritime Power” Strategy as a Continental-Maritime Composite Type], *Haiyang wenti yanjiu* (2018).

³⁸ Xiao, “Haiyang zai Zhongguo diyuanzhengzhi zhong de zuoyong.”

³⁹ Zhang Wei, “A General Review of the History of China’s Sea-Power Theory Development,” trans. Shazeda Ahmed, *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 4 (2015): 82. Zhang Wei’s article was originally published in July 2012 in the journal *Frontiers*.

⁴⁰ Jiang Zemin, cited in Daniel M. Hartnett and Frederic Vellucci, “Toward a Maritime Security Strategy: An Analysis of Chinese Views since the Early 1990s,” in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2011), 91; and Zhang, “A General Review of the History of China’s Sea-Power Theory Development.”

⁴¹ For more details, see Hartnett and Vellucci, “Toward a Maritime Security Strategy.”

⁴² See Bernard D. Cole, “The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy,” interview by Nai-Yu Chen and Jeremy Rausch, NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, March 26, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-evolution-of-chinas-naval-strategy>; and Erickson, “Geography Matters, Time Collides.”

and development.⁴³ His idea was eventually incorporated into the government's March 2011 12th Five-Year Plan laying out national development priorities.⁴⁴ A few months later, the leadership officially expressed China's ambition to become a "maritime superpower" (*haiyang qianguo*), as enshrined in the 2012 18th Party Congress report.⁴⁵

The rationales and strategic thinking behind China's incremental transformation into a maritime power, the role of nationalism as a driver of its naval ambitions,⁴⁶ and the importance of Mahanian theories in influencing China's vision for itself as a world-class sea power,⁴⁷ as well as the impact of the general evolution from a brown to a blue water mentality on the PLA Navy's capacities, operational doctrine, and tactics, have been thoroughly studied in recent decades by U.S. naval experts, and I will not duplicate their research here.⁴⁸ I will focus instead on the question of how Chinese elites made the connection between space and power, between geographic positioning and decision-making, and between China's geopolitical identity and the contours of its expanded mental map. If, as Spykman observed, "a land power thinks in terms of continuous surfaces surrounding a central point of control, while a sea power thinks in terms of points and connecting lines dominating an immense territory,"⁴⁹ then how is China (or Chinese decision-makers) "thinking in space"?⁵⁰

A "Composite Land-Sea Power"

In late 2000, a PLA colonel specializing in military strategy and a prominent international relations scholar from Renmin University coauthored an article positioning China geopolitically by describing it as neither a continental nor a maritime power, but as a "composite land-sea country" (*luhai fuhe guojia*). That is, China has both a continental depth lacking natural obstacles and coastlines facing the open seas. The two authors, Shao Yongling and Shi Yinhong, described how this positioning had presented an "acute" double vulnerability for the PRC during the Cold War, both at sea because of the United States' efforts to "implement a policy of blockade against China and establish a crescent-shaped military encirclement to isolate and block China" and on land because of the Soviet Union's threat "hanging like a sword of Damocles over the Chinese people's head."⁵¹ Since the 1960s, the Chinese leadership relegated its maritime interests to a secondary

⁴³ For details about the "Integrated Land-Sea Planning," see, among others, Xiao Peng and Song Binghua, "Luhai tongchou yanjiu zongshu" [A Review of Integrated Land-Sea Planning Research], *Theoretical Horizon*, no. 11 (2012); Bi Jingjing, "Lun luhai tongchou de zhanlue shiye" [A Strategic Perspective on Integrated Land-Sea Planning] (2013); Wang Tianqing and Chen Tianyi, "Guotu kongjian guihua luhai tongchou de hexin renwu yu yingdui celue" [The Core Objectives and Response Strategies of Land-Sea Coordination in Territorial Space Planning], *Planners* 39, no. 12 (2023): 8–14, <http://www.planners.com.cn/uploads/20240131/ea65fc312415df4700fa80d18f073ebd.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Xiao and Song, "Luhai tongchou yanjiu zongshu."

⁴⁵ For Xi Jinping's views on the significance of making China a maritime superpower, see "Comrade Xi Jinping's Remarks to the Eighth Collective Study Session of the CCP Politburo," *Pacific Journal*, July 30, 2013, trans. CSIS, Interpret: China, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/comrade-xi-jinpings-remarks-to-the-eighth-collective-study-session-of-the-ccp-politburo>.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Ross, "Nationalism, Geopolitics, and Naval Expansionism from the Nineteenth Century to the Rise of China," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 4 (2018): 11–35.

⁴⁷ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

⁴⁸ The work of U.S. scholars from the Naval War College and the Center for Naval Analyses, among others, has contributed immensely to our common knowledge and understanding of the PLA Navy's evolution and strategies.

⁴⁹ Nicholas J. Spykman, "Geography and Foreign Policy, II," *American Political Science Review* 32, no. 2 (1938): 224.

⁵⁰ Andrew Rhodes, "Thinking in Space: The Role of Geography in National Security Decision-Making," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 4 (2019): 90–108.

⁵¹ Shao Yongling and Shi Yinhong, "Jindai Ouzhou luhai fuhe guojia de mingyun yu dangdai Zhongguo de xuanze" [The Fate of Modern European Composite Land-Sea Powers and Contemporary China's Choices], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*, no. 10 (2000).

position and focused instead on preparing for a massive Soviet military invasion coming from its northern continental border.⁵² The absolute priority of defeating the Soviet Union was “not only the prominent content of our political life, but also the core tasks of our economic and national defense construction, and the main spearhead of our military struggle.”⁵³ The end of the Cold War “fundamentally changed” China’s strategic landscape: with its northern land frontiers at their most secure historically and the normalization of its relations with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, China was now presented with “a broad space to open up to the outside world and develop at sea.”⁵⁴

Reviewing the strategic decisions made historically by countries with similar hybrid continental-maritime characteristics, such as France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain, Shao and Shi noted that whereas the “characteristics of maritime and continental nations are unchangeable, the path taken by land-sea composite countries is the result of a choice.” Successfully expanding in both directions at the same time requires “both luck and great diplomatic skill and finesse” and may end up dispersing limited resources. Hence, “China’s road to becoming a powerful country lies in getting rid of the strategic choice dilemma and double vulnerability” and in applying a principle of strategic concentration: if China wanted to expand at sea, it would have to first ensure that its continental backyard is secured. To this end, the two strategists advised strengthening relations with Russia and Central Asian countries. They concluded, rather presciently, that “under the new historical conditions, we can fully establish a new Silk Road connecting the Eurasian continent.”⁵⁵

Being a composite land-sea power could be, according to some observers, the “best configuration” and an “indispensable” geopolitical feature for becoming a world power.⁵⁶ Yet, after carefully examining historical precedents, many Chinese strategists caution decision-makers about the various pitfalls China must avoid in its quest for greater strategic space. In two essays published in 2010 and 2012, Wu Zhengyu, a prominent geopolitical analyst specializing in sea power, warned that the transformation of composite land-sea countries into sea powers would lead to pressures coming both from neighboring countries that would react to changes in the regional balance of power and from the dominant maritime power that would perceive the growing capabilities of an emerging sea power as a marker of global ambitions meant to challenge its own hegemonic position. Regardless of the composite land-sea country’s intentions (including when they were largely defensive), both neighbors and the global hegemon would inevitably focus on the development of the rising power’s naval capacity to measure the extent of the threat, just as American scholars have done with regard to China’s rapidly increasing maritime power.⁵⁷ Other experts echo Shao and Shi’s points about the two-front vulnerability of composite land-sea

⁵² For a discussion of how this affected China’s mental and actual map at the time, see Covell Meyskens, “China’s Strategic Space in the Mao Era,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023 <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-strategic-space-in-the-mao-era>.

⁵³ Shao and Shi, “Jindai Ouzhou luhai fuhe guojia de mingyun yu dangdai Zhongguo de xuanze.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Yang Yong, “Fahui hailu jianbei youshi shi daxing hailu fuhe guojia de biran xuanze” [Giving Full Play to the Advantages of Both Land and Sea Is an Inevitable Choice for a Large Land-Sea Composite Country], *Heilongjiang Social Sciences*, no. 84, 2004.

⁵⁷ Wu, “Haiquan yu luquan fuhexing qianguo.”

countries, the risk of dispersion of resources, and these countries' difficulty in maintaining a sustainable strategic direction over the long term.⁵⁸

If they try to expand simultaneously on land and at sea, composite land-sea powers may be confronted with what Jiang Peng calls “Wilhelm’s dilemma”: eliciting balancing alliances from their neighbors while misinterpreting the hegemon’s reaction—be it appeasement or hostility—as a justification for further advancing in the direction of expansion. Appeasement will be interpreted as weakness and lack of determination from the part of the hegemon to counter the rising power’s expansion, while a strong opposition will give the rising power an incentive to push harder in search of a way to “break the hegemon’s strategic encirclement.”⁵⁹ Jiang’s thorough study of pre-World War I Germany’s geopolitical positioning alternates between implicit and explicit parallels with the situation currently faced by the Chinese leadership.⁶⁰ He notes, for example, that over the twenty years prior to the outbreak of World War I, Kaiser Wilhelm’s desk was covered with research reports on topics such as the necessity to develop a powerful navy, to build the Baghdad-Berlin railway, and to struggle for hegemony over Europe. The German emperor eventually agreed with all of them, thinking they would “bring prestige to the monarch and to the country.”⁶¹ This description makes it difficult for the reader not to transpose the scene onto Xi Jinping’s office, his desk piled high with PLA demands for a strong navy, Belt and Road infrastructure-building project proposals, and memos promoting an “Asia for Asians” ideal.

If you are a rising composite land-sea power, be a Bismarck, not a Wilhelm, advocates Jiang Peng, and choose your geopolitical positioning wisely. Instead of seeking a position as a “world power” with both land and sea capabilities, define yourself strictly as a regional continental power and “resist the temptation to pursue greater power and prestige.” Maintain a strong political decision-making center capable of coordinating and guiding the demands of various domestic interest groups. Resist those who are obsessed with “naval nationalism” and who believe that a strong navy is key to ensuring the transportation lifeline of your export-oriented economy, safeguarding national overseas interests, defending national sovereignty, and enhancing global strategic influence. Be self-restrained: Bismarck understood that there was no such thing as “absolute security” for a nation with overseas commercial interests or colonies, and that any German attempt to surpass Britain’s sea power would “trigger a futile arms race or be completely offset by the combined superiority of the British and French navies.” Jiang concludes that rising composite land-sea powers that follow Bismarck’s example will not be confronted with a “squeezing and containment” of their two geo-spaces. For China not to fall into “Wilhelm’s dilemma,” it should pursue a “regional land-power strategy of prudence, patience and moderation—not prematurely touching the sensitive geopolitical nerves of the United States, the sea power hegemon, in East Asia.”⁶² Jiang’s words of caution, written in 2016, may already have come too late.

⁵⁸ For in-depth analysis of the concept and its implications as presented in Chinese strategic writings, see Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, “Seizing on Weakness: Allied Strategy for Competing with China’s Globalizing Military,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2021, 37–42. See also Kong, “Zhongguo zuowei luhai fuhe guojia de diyuanzhanlüe xuanze”; Zheng, “Luhai fuhe xing Zhongguo ‘haiyang qiangguo’ zhanlüe fenxi”; Liu Yemei and Yin Zhaolu, “Bainianbianju xia Zhongguo luhai tongchou zhanlüe de lilu yu sikao” [Logic and Reflections about China’s Land-Sea Integrated Strategy in the Context of the Changes Unseen in a Century], *China Development* 21, no. 1 (2021); Wanyuan Peng and Lin Wang, “Historical Teachings on the Failure of the German Imperial Navy in Geopolitical Perspective,” in *Proceedings of the 2022 4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2022)*, ed. Bootheina Majoul, Digvijay Pandya, and Lin Wang (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2023).

⁵⁹ Jiang Peng “Hailu fuhe xing diyuanzhengzhi daguo jueqi de ‘Weilian kunjing’ yu zhanlüe xuanze” [The “Wilhelm Dilemma” and Strategic Choices in the Rise of Maritime-Continental Composite Geopolitical Great Powers], *Contemporary Asia Pacific*, no. 5 (2016).

⁶⁰ For more historical background, see Woodruff D. Smith, “The Political Culture of Imperialism in the German Kaiserreich,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-political-culture-of-imperialism-in-the-german-kaiserreich>.

⁶¹ Jiang, “Hailu fuhe xing diyuanzhengzhi daguo jueqi de ‘Weilian kunjing’ yu zhanlüe xuanze.”

⁶² *Ibid.*

China at the Center

Looking at the evolution of the discussions within China's strategic community over the span of twenty-plus years, the consolidation of the self-perception regarding the nation's growing power becomes gradually apparent. In addition to the sustained dedication to evaluating China's power and comparing it to that of other nations, the focus incrementally shifted to discussing what the country should do with its increasing capabilities. This changing self-perception is not only the result of national calculations and assessments, confirmed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund projections of China's future economic performance; it is also a product of recurrent, unsolicited external prompts. Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, foreign excitement about the supposed advent of a "Beijing Consensus," a "G-2," or "Chinamerica," along with official invitations for China to become a responsible stakeholder in the existing international system, regularly validated the self-assessment of Chinese elites. Despite converging evidence of China's future upward trajectory, further reinforced by the country overtaking Japan as the second-largest world economy in 2010, many Chinese civilian thinkers remained committed to a prudent and cautious attitude and continued to favor Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide" mantra. Representatives of the Chinese military, on the other hand, adopted a more nationalistic stance and vociferously supported a maximalist vision for China's role in world affairs.⁶³ A series of best-selling books published after 2008, all characterized by the merging of nationalist and geopolitical themes, illustrated how the domestic discussion had moved on from focusing on a lack of national self-confidence to "exploring how China can manage its transition to world leadership."⁶⁴ The books' references to geopolitical themes such as "vital space," the need for unchallenged access to natural resources, organismic descriptions of the state, and the struggle for survival in an unjust order harked back "to a period when international politics was based on spheres of influence," wrote Christopher Hughes in 2011, observing with alarm the "geopolitik turn" in Chinese nationalism.⁶⁵

The 2009–13 period (roughly between the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the beginning of Xi Jinping's rule) appears to be pivotal in China's appreciation of itself as a great power on the global stage. This was a period bookmarked by modifications of Deng's foreign policy guideline, first by Hu Jintao in a speech to Chinese ambassadors stressing that China needed to "actively accomplish something" (*jiji yousuo zuowei*),⁶⁶ and then by Xi, who in late 2013 called for the nation to "strive for achievement" (*fenfayouwei*).⁶⁷ Accompanying the political leadership in its journey toward greatness, prominent economists, historians, and international relations scholars from the country's top academic institutions also recognized in November 2012 that the "hide and bide" strategy had served China well for 30 years and bought it some "time and space for development on the international stage," but it was no longer fitting for a country that was expected to become the world's largest economy by 2020.⁶⁸

⁶³ Willy Lam, "Hawks vs. Doves: Beijing Debates 'Core Interests' and Sino-U.S. Relations," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, August 19, 2010.

⁶⁴ Christopher Hughes, "Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 601–20. Hughes examines four books: *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong; *Unhappy China* by Song Xiaojun, Wang Xiaodong, Huang Jisu, Song Qiang, and Liu Yang; *China's Maritime Rights* by Zhang Wenmu; and *China Dream* by Liu Mingfu.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ For details, see Bonnie S. Glaser and Benjamin Dooley, "China's 11th Ambassadorial Conference Signals Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, November 4, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-11th-ambassadorial-conference-signals-continuity-and-change-in-foreign-policy>; and M. Taylor Fravel, "Revising Deng's Foreign Policy," *Diplomat*, January 17, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/01/revising-dengs-foreign-policy-2>.

⁶⁷ Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014): 153–84.

⁶⁸ "Weilai shinian de Zhongguo" [China in the Coming Decade], Peking University, Report, no. R201301, March 2013.

One active participant in discussions regarding China's grand strategy was Wang Jisi, a professor at Peking University, who epitomizes the radical change that happened during this short period of time. In a paper published in 2011, Wang still advocated for China to keep a low profile and expressed fear that "some people in our country have shown a kind of empty arrogance in their exchanges with foreigners, and some research results and media reports have also appeared overly optimistic in their judgment of the international situation and China's international positioning, which is worthy of great vigilance and should be corrected."⁶⁹ Raising China's profile would result in losing development opportunities, damaging its relations with the United States and the West, and creating external problems that could end up affecting China domestically. To further bolster his argument, Wang quoted Mao's speech at the 1956 commemoration of the Xinhai Revolution, warning of great powers' excesses.⁷⁰ In the English version of his essay published in *Foreign Affairs*, he emphasized that China's geostrategic focus should be Asia and underlined how the Chinese leadership was "sober in its objectives" and mainly concerned with protecting national core interests "against the cluster of threats that the country faces today."⁷¹

Two years later, any trace of this emphasis on a low profile or modest attitude had disappeared from Wang's thinking. Instead, the renowned scholar asserted that China was standing tall at the center of the strategic chessboard and should see itself not as "the core of the old sinocentric order" (*huaxia zhixu zhong de zhongyang zhi guo*)—i.e., only as the dominant power in East Asia—but as a central country in the world.⁷² According to Wang, China is one of the three "major politico-economic plates," together with Europe and the United States. Each possesses its "own geographical advantages and strategic depth, a large 'vital space' [*shengcun kongjian*]; each is at the center of economic cooperation areas integrated with one another under globalization."⁷³ China is neither a country of the global North (even though it is, by virtue of its geographic location, in the Northern Hemisphere), nor of the global South (because of its astounding economic wealth), nor of the East (because this is a Eurocentric perspective), nor, obviously, of the West. In short, China is at the center of the world.

After resolving the thorny issue of China's global positioning, Wang then called for "drawing a 'strategic geographic picture' that includes geopolitical, geoeconomic, geotechnological, and other factors to form a 'grand strategy for peaceful development.'" He advocated that China should "play a bigger game in Eurasia and the world" and sketched a new mental map of China's strategic space, extending to and including the greater Middle East, Europe, and Africa and covering both the Eurasian continent and its adjacent waters (i.e., the western Pacific and Indian Ocean) (see **Figure 3**). Wang envisioned a global geoeconomic strategy with the developing world as its main focus. Having pushed China's geostrategic horizons to their widest possible extent, Wang quickly added that "at the same time" China should "maintain a sober head and a modest and prudent

⁶⁹ Wang Jisi, "Zhongguo de guoji dingwei wenti yu 'taoquangyanghui, yousuo zuowei' de zhanlue sixiang."

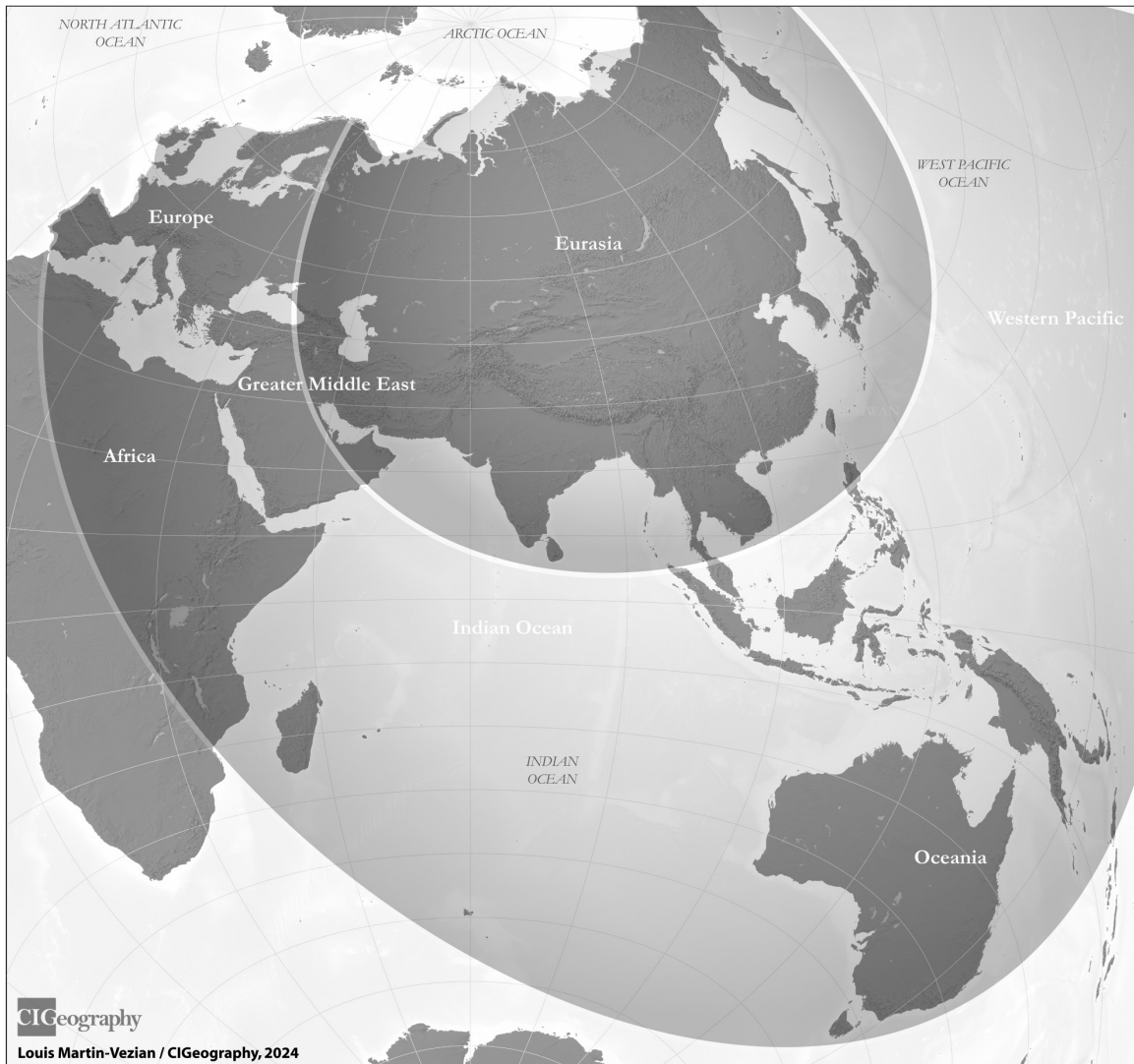
⁷⁰ "[China] ought to have made a greater contribution to humanity. Her contribution over a long period has been far too small. For this we are regretful. But we must be modest—not only now, but forty-five years hence as well. We should always be modest. In our international relations, we Chinese people should get rid of great-power chauvinism resolutely, thoroughly, wholly and completely." Translation is by Marxists.org and available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch18.htm>.

⁷¹ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way," *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2011.

⁷² Wang Jisi, "Zhongguo de quanqiu dingwei yu diyuanzhengzhi zhanlue" [China's Global Positioning and Geostrategy], *Southern Metropolis Daily*, August 12, 2013, available at <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/66458.html>.

⁷³ Wang Jisi, "Dongxinanbei, Zhongguo ju 'zhong': Yi zhong zhanlue daqiju sikao" [East, West, South, North, and China at the "Center": A Strategic Chessboard Reflection], *China's International Strategy Review* (2013). A greatly expunged version of this article was published in English in the *American Interest* in February 2015 under the title "China in the Middle" and is available at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/02/china-in-the-middle>.

FIGURE 3 Wang Jisi's mental map of "China at the center"



attitude”—a recommendation that he tones down using an excerpt from Mao Zedong’s 1935 poem “Kunlun.”⁷⁴ He then concluded: “If Mao had the poetic imagination to look at the world during such a difficult period, there is all the more reason for Chinese strategists and leaders eighty years later to have the courage to keep in mind the entire world and humankind.”

Chinese strategists and leaders did, in fact, expand their strategic horizons to the entire world, as the next chapter will describe, without ever acknowledging their hegemonic intent.

⁷⁴ Translated by Xu Yuanhong, the verses Wang Jisi quotes are as follows: “Kunlun, I tell you now: You need not be so high, nor need you so much snow. Could I but lean against the sky and draw my sword to cut you into three, I would give to Europe your crest and to America your breast and leave in the Orient the rest. In a peaceful world young and old might share alike your warmth and cold!” The full poem in English, read by Lin Shaowen, can be found at <https://chinaplus.cri.cn/video/culture/169/20180510/125222.html>. The poem was written in October 1935, as Mao was leading the Red Army through the final stage of the Long March. Mao explained that the theme of his poem was anti-imperialism, which can be interpreted as a globalist vision and a proposition “to establish a new world order as envisaged by Mao Zedong.” See He Xin, “He Xin’s Interpretation of Mao Zedong’s Poems 2: Dominating the Universe,” *Seetao*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.seetao.com/details/12256.html>.

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CHAPTER 4

The Logic and Grammar of Expansion

The need for China to expand its “strategic space” emerged as a concept out of Chinese military circles in the mid-1980s as they attempted to sort out the strategic implications of the new paradigm devised by senior party leaders in the post-Maoist period. Following this initial effort, the formulation mostly disappeared from public discussions, only to eventually resurface around the turn of the 21st century. As their country’s ascending trajectory began to appear ineluctable, Chinese planners were carefully monitoring the trends in their strategic environment, which presented a variety of seemingly contradictory characteristics. While they were feeling increasingly confident about China’s growing comprehensive national power, they also perceived mounting external pressures and increased hostile efforts to constrain and constrict their country’s strategic space. At the same time, they determined that the United States was beginning to suffer economically, lose its moral high ground and international credibility, and overdraw its national power and was starting to reduce its global military footprint. Although this did not signal an immediate end to its hegemony, the United States would not return to its prime and was already showing “the typical characteristics of hegemonic menopause such as paranoia and distrust,” whereas China was entering its “period of adolescence.”¹ If the West had failed to “strangle the New China in the cradle” when it was weak, then it would be impossible now as it was gaining unprecedented strength.² As the United States was entering a period of relative decline, a new wave of rising powers from the developing world was emerging.³ With their rise and the “rapid power transfer from the West to the non-Western world,” the international environment was experiencing “historic changes.”⁴

In the face of these rapidly changing national and international conditions, Chinese strategic thinkers engaged in lively discussions about which strategy to pursue. The exact chronology of the evolution of their ideas is difficult to establish with precision, due, first, to an abundance of overlapping discussions and, second, to the slow-burning character of the deliberations. Some concepts and ideas that initially appeared in documents between 2001 and 2005 may have been endorsed eventually by the broader strategic community or even by the political leadership only a decade later. Overall, domestic discussions follow a course that starts around the turn of the 21st century with the perception of an accelerated methodical encirclement campaign targeting China, before shifting, roughly from 2008 to 2013, toward deliberating about the directions in which to break through the perceived encirclement. During this second phase of four to five years (a period that the previous chapter found as pivotal in China’s appreciation of itself as a great power), the discussions take a radically more ambitious direction and focus on how to grant a significant expansion of China’s room for strategic maneuver. If it is to survive, develop, be able to shape the external environment, and eventually fulfill its objective to become a great power on the global stage, China needs to expand its strategic space well beyond its immediate periphery.

¹ Peng Guangqian, “Sanlun zhanlüe jiyuqi—Zhongguo de zhanlüe jiyuqi tiqian zhongjiele ma?” [Three Comments on the Period of Strategic Opportunity—Has China’s Period of Strategic Opportunity Ended Prematurely?], *Xinhua*, March 20, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-03/20/c_124472782.htm.

² *Ibid.*

³ Yang Jiemin “Qianxi Aobama zhengfu de quanqiu zhanlüe tiaozheng” [An Analysis of the Obama Administration’s Global Strategic Readjustment], *International Studies* 2 (2011).

⁴ Wang Honggang, “Zhong Mei ‘hezuo huoban guanxi’ xin dingwei pingxi” [Review of the New Orientation of the Sino-U.S. “Cooperative Partnership”], *Contemporary International Relations* 2 (2011).

Strategic analysts henceforth started imagining the world as China's oyster and a future global order no longer dominated by the United States.⁵

As we examine the collective ruminations spanning over a long decade, it remains impossible to resolve the encirclement “chicken and egg” question. Do strategic elites feel China is encircled because they see all the constraints they face as they are about to advance outward, having already made up their mind about the necessity to expand? Is the perceived encirclement the result of China's already active expansionism? Are the responses of other states eliciting China's need to draw counter-encirclement plans? Regardless of whether this perception stems from genuine hostile foreign maneuvers, reflects the inherent paranoia of an authoritarian regime, or is deliberately inflated as a rationale and cover for expansionist plans, it provides the logical next step: a strategic imperative to break out of the encirclement. Thus, what began as a defensive position seamlessly transitions into offensive planning.

Parsing through the substantial number of writings produced during that period on topics related to China's strategic space, three main observations come to mind. First, a common theme runs through these discussions: expansion is integral to China's accession to great-power status. Some strategic thinkers may be more modest about its extent or diverge on which areas and regions should be included in China's imagined strategic space, but the consensus is clear about the inevitability of going through an expansionist phase as part of fulfilling the nation's destiny as a great power. Great powers have far-reaching interests and need a greater space; to paraphrase Yang Jiechi, “that's a fact.”⁶ China is no exception. In that respect, the discussions that occurred a decade and a half ago were not genuine debates. Whether they belong to national security or academic circles, and whether they examine this question from a historical, geopolitical, international relations, or military perspective, Chinese thinkers are all talking about the same thing. Their main point of apparent divergence is how far and wide the outer boundaries of the country's strategic space should go.

Second, strategic thinkers are not exclusively fixated on spatial geographies but also attach great value to nonmaterial realms. Concerns about access to natural resources, raw materials, or new markets, although sometimes presented in defense of China's need to broaden its outlook, are usually not a central theme of their discussions.⁷ On the other hand, the necessity to claim an ideological safe space is particularly prominent and considered an existential matter.

Finally, it is difficult to establish a direct connection between external events and the intensification of domestic pleas to seek a greater strategic space for China. Although discussions related to perceived foreign hostile compressions and necessary strategic breakthroughs may at times be encouraged by specific events that heighten certain sensitivities, their main backdrop remains the strategic community's determination about China's power. As such, rather than being the proximate cause for China's decision to expand its horizons beyond its national borders, the

⁵ “Zhongguo de shijie zhixu xiangxiang yu quanqiu zhanlue guihua' yantao hui” [Seminar on “China's Imagined World Order and Global Strategic Planning”], *Wenhua Zongheng*, February 21, 2013, <http://www.21bcr.com/zhongguodeshijiezhixuxiangxiangyuyuanquanqiuazhanlueguihuayantaoahui>; and Wang Xiangsui, “Hou Meiguo shidai' Zhongguo de da zhanlue” [China's Grand Strategy in the “Post-American Era”], *Observation and Exchange* 139 (2014).

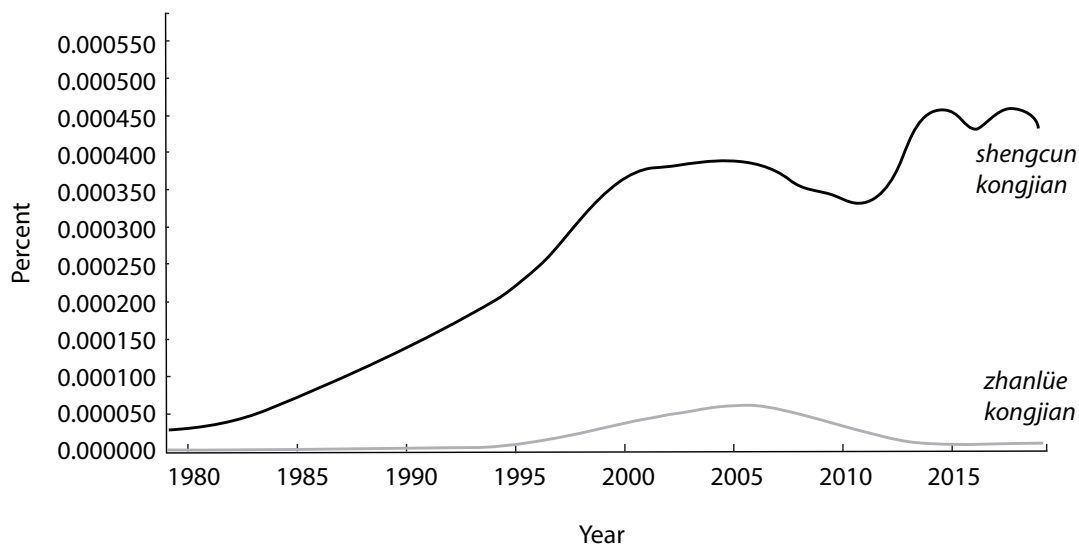
⁶ At the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi in 2010, the then foreign minister Yang Jiechi told his Singaporean counterpart that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's a fact.”

⁷ Evidently, this does not mean that energy security is not a crucial concern for China's strategic community. For an examination of how the country seeks to solve its energy conundrum, see Gabriel Collins, “Energy as a Strategic Space for China: Words and Actions Point to a Competitive Future,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Mapping China's Strategic Space, February 28, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/energy-as-a-strategic-space-for-china-words-and-actions-point-to-a-competitive-future>.

Obama administration’s 2011 decision to operate a strategic “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific appears to have confirmed, rather than sparked, a collective assessment that was long foregone.

As Nadine Godehardt notes, since Xi Jinping came to power, the Chinese foreign policy discourse has included formulations that reflect the creation of a new “geopolitical code” that we need to familiarize ourselves with.⁸ Terms such as “vital space” and “strategic space” are prominent representatives of the evolution of a vision deeply rooted in geopolitics (see **Figure 1**). This chapter begins with an overview of the perception of constriction that became increasingly prevalent among Chinese strategic circles at the turn of the 21st century. The chapter then describes the various strands that together form a new grammar of expansion and delineate the contours of a new Chinese vital space.

FIGURE 1 Occurrence of the phrases “vital/survival space” (*shengcun kongjian*) and “strategic space” (*zhanlüe kongjian*) in a corpus of Chinese books in simplified characters (1979–2019)



SOURCE: Google Books Ngram Viewer, 2024.

NOTE: “Shengcun kongjian” is used as the Chinese translation for “Lebensraum” or “living space,” a concept first introduced by Friedrich Ratzel in the 1890s which became the basic principle of Nazi Germany’s worldview and guided its military expansionism. The term is also used in Chinese texts in contexts unrelated to Nazi ideology, as a way to describe a space that grants the ability to exist or to survive, or, in other words, a space that is vital to the state’s interests. When used in such contexts, it can be understood as a conceptual equivalent to “strategic space.” Except when it is explicitly used as a translation for Lebensraum, the preferred translation for “shengcun kongjian” used in this report is “vital space” rather than “living space” as a way to convey its potential multiple meanings.

⁸ Nadine Godehardt, “China’s Geopolitical Code: Shaping the Next World Order,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, January 24, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-geopolitical-code-shaping-the-next-world-order>.

“Squeezed” Strategic Spaces

For a while, few, if any, Chinese strategic thinkers followed Senior Colonel Xu Guangyu’s effort in the late 1980s to comprehend the nature and extent of the strategic space China would need to support its rise. During subsequent years, those who used the “strategic space” formulation usually associated it with terms conveying constriction rather than extension, without much explanation as to what the concept exactly entailed and seldom with direct references to China itself. The bulk of the attention was given instead to Russia.

In the first decade of the 21st century, several articles showed an increased concern for the way Russia’s strategic space was becoming “squeezed” (*jiya*) as a consequence of a series of events in the post-Soviet regions. In addition to three “color revolutions” that occurred in succession in Georgia (November 2003), Ukraine (November 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (March 2005), seven of the former Warsaw Pact signatories joined NATO in March 2004, while the alliance reaffirmed its commitment to further enlargement and approved a major expansion of its role in Afghanistan.⁹ Chinese commentators interpreted these events as a continuation of the U.S. anti-Soviet containment policy well into the post-Cold War era. According to this interpretation, the United States was determined to prevent the re-emergence of Russia as a geostrategic competitor in Eurasia and vowed to establish a *cordon sanitaire* made of democracies that would inspire Russian people into following their example.¹⁰ The implicit ulterior motive was to instigate regime change in Moscow. The stationing of foreign troops in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the September 11 attacks was understood as an illustration of the United States’ intention to “militarily infiltrate Central Asia under the pretext of counterterrorism.”¹¹ Russia was seen as the victim of a deliberate Western ideological and military encirclement campaign aimed at constraining its western, southwestern, and southeastern flanks.

Evidently, Russia’s strategic space was not alone in falling prey to such maneuvers. China’s geographic proximity meant that its strategic space was also being increasingly encroached on.¹² In this context, the first-ever joint military exercise between China and Russia, Peace Mission 2005, officially presented as countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism, was more fundamentally a means for the two powers to “jointly expand their strategic space” and create a strong “defense line” that the United States would be incapable of breaking.¹³ In addition to being the collateral victim of U.S. efforts to control the post-Soviet space and contain Russia, China was also the direct target of U.S. maneuvers. Shen Weilie, a professor of strategy at the People’s Liberation Army’s National Defense University, describes how the United States has been

⁹ Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined NATO in March 2004, following the entry of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999. The Istanbul Summit in June 2004 reaffirmed NATO’s commitment to enlargement and increased presence in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Zheng Yu, Jiang Mingjun, and Liu Fenghua, *Pujing ba nian: Eluosi fuxing zhi lu (2000–2008)* [Putin’s Eight Years: Russia’s Road to Revival (2000–2008)] (Beijing: Economic Management Publishing House, 2008), cited in Hu Ruihua, “Shixi lengzhanhou Mei-E diyuazhengzhi kongjian jingzheng?” [An Analysis of the Post-Cold War U.S.-Russia Competition for Geopolitical Space], *Human Geography* 25, no. 5 (2010): 111; and Yu Haibo and Chen Qiang, “Lengzhan jieshuhou Beiyue dui lianti diqu de kuozhang ji qi qianjing” [NATO’s Post-Cold War Expansion in the CIS Region and Its Prospects], *Heping yu fazhan* 2 (2010).

¹¹ “Zhenfengxiangdui: E jun chongxin jin zhu Zhongya diqu diyu Meiguo shentou” [Tit-for-Tat: Russian Military Re-enters Central Asia to Counter U.S. Infiltration], Sohu, October 28, 2003, <http://news.sohu.com/08/79/news214907908.shtml>; and Yang Huilin, “Meiguo jiajin xiang Zhongya shentou jiya Eluosi zhanlue kongjian” [The United States Has Intensified Its Infiltration of Central Asia to Squeeze Russia’s Strategic Space], *Global Times*, December 1, 2004.

¹² Wang Wei, “Zhongguo nengfou chongpo ‘ezhi liantiao?’” [Can China Break the “Containment Chain?”], *Contemporary Military Digest*, September 2005; and Yu Zhengliang and Que Tianshu, “Tixi zhuanxing he Zhongguo de zhanlue kongjian” [System Transformation and China’s Strategic Space], *World Economics and Politics* 10 (2006).

¹³ “Zhong E queding shouci lianhe junyan fang’an jiang lianhe kuozhan zhanlue kongjian” [China and Russia Confirm First Joint Military Exercises to Jointly Expand Strategic Space], China News, April 16, 2005, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2005/2005-04-16/26/563586.shtml>.

regarding China as its “main enemy and rival” since the founding of the People’s Republic of China and has implemented successive geostrategies spanning from overt hostility, to “Westernization, division and weakening,” to “conengagement”—all aiming at encircling and containing China and posing “a serious political, economic and security threat to China.”¹⁴ Chinese analysts contend that during its second term (2004–9), the George W. Bush administration not only intensified its military, economic, and political containment of China but also ramped up its activities of “ideological infiltration.”¹⁵ The Bush Doctrine’s commitment to the global spreading of freedom and democracy was understood as the main reason for the wave of color revolutions in Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Bush’s belief that trade with China not only was good for U.S. businesses but also would help promote freedom did not go unnoticed.¹⁷ China needed to remain vigilant about the Western strategy of “peaceful evolution,” which remained unchanged, and to avoid falling “into the trap of so-called ‘democracy.’”¹⁸ Promoting the development of the Chinese private sector and strengthening ties with Chinese academics and nongovernmental organizations were therefore perceived by Chinese analysts as nothing but U.S. nonmilitary means to bring about China’s domestic political transformation.¹⁹ The survival and preservation of China’s socialist system, defined as a core national interest, continued to be threatened by the “strategy of Westernization and fragmentation by Western hostile forces.”²⁰

Ideological pressures were not the only threats constricting China’s strategic space. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review report mentioned the possibility that “a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region [Asia]” and reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to preclude “hostile domination of critical areas, particularly Europe, Northeast Asia, the East Asian littoral, and the Middle East and Southwest Asia.”²¹ Although China was not mentioned by name, it was not difficult to recognize which emerging Asian power the Pentagon was getting ready to contain. Sitting in Beijing and looking at the map of U.S. military involvement, it also appeared that by 2005 the United States was concentrating two-thirds of its armed forces along an “arc” stretching through the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe, tightening the western segment of its “pincer” from Iraq and Afghanistan to Bulgaria and the Baltic Sea, while

¹⁴ Shen Weilie, “Zhongguo weilai de diyuanzhanlue zhi sikao” [Thoughts about China’s Future Geostrategy], *World Economics and Politics* 9 (2001).

¹⁵ Cao Changsheng, “Bush lianren hou Meiguo ‘xihua,’ ‘fenhua’ Zhongguo de xin tedian” [New Characteristics of the U.S. “Westernization” and “Division” of China after Bush’s Reelection], in “Meiguo de ‘minzuhua’ zhanlue zhide jingti” [U.S. “Democratization” Strategy Deserves Vigilance], *Foreign Theoretical Trends* 6 (2005). See also Shi Junyu, “Meiguo ezhi Zhongguo you si ce” [Four Ways the United States Contains China], *Ta Kung Pao*, June 24, 2005, available at <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/7286.html>.

¹⁶ Niu Xinchun, “Meiguo de quanqiu minzuhua zhanlue” [America’s Global Democratization Strategy], in “Meiguo de ‘minzuhua’ zhanlue zhide jingti.”

¹⁷ In remarks at a Boeing plant in Washington State on May 17, 2000, Bush stated: “First, trade with China will promote freedom. Freedom is not easily contained. Once a measure of economic freedom is permitted, a measure of political freedom will follow. China today is not a free society. At home, toward its own people, it can be ruthless. Abroad, toward its neighbors, it can be reckless. When I am president, China will know that America’s values are always part of America’s agenda. Our advocacy of human freedom is not a formality of diplomacy, it is a fundamental commitment of our country. It is the source of our confidence that communism, in every form, has seen its day.” The full text is available from the *Washington Post* at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/foreignpolicy/bushchina.html>.

¹⁸ Wang Guifang, “Guojia liyi yu Zhongguo anquan zhanlue de xuanze” [National Interests and China’s Security Strategy Choices], 2006, quoted in Takashi Suzuki, “Kin’nren ni okeru Chugoku no gunji anzen hosho senmonka no senryaku ninshiki: Kokueki, chiseigaku, ‘senryaku henkyo’ o chūshin ni” [Chinese Military and Security Experts’ Recent Strategic Perceptions: Focusing on National Interests, Geopolitics, and “Strategic Frontiers”], in “Chugoku no kokunai josei to taigai seisaku” [China’s Domestic Situation and Foreign Policy], Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 2017, https://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/H28_China/H28_China_s_domestic_situation_and_foreign_policy_fulltext.pdf.

¹⁹ Cao, “Bush lianren hou Meiguo ‘xihua,’ ‘fenhua’ Zhongguo de xin tedian.”

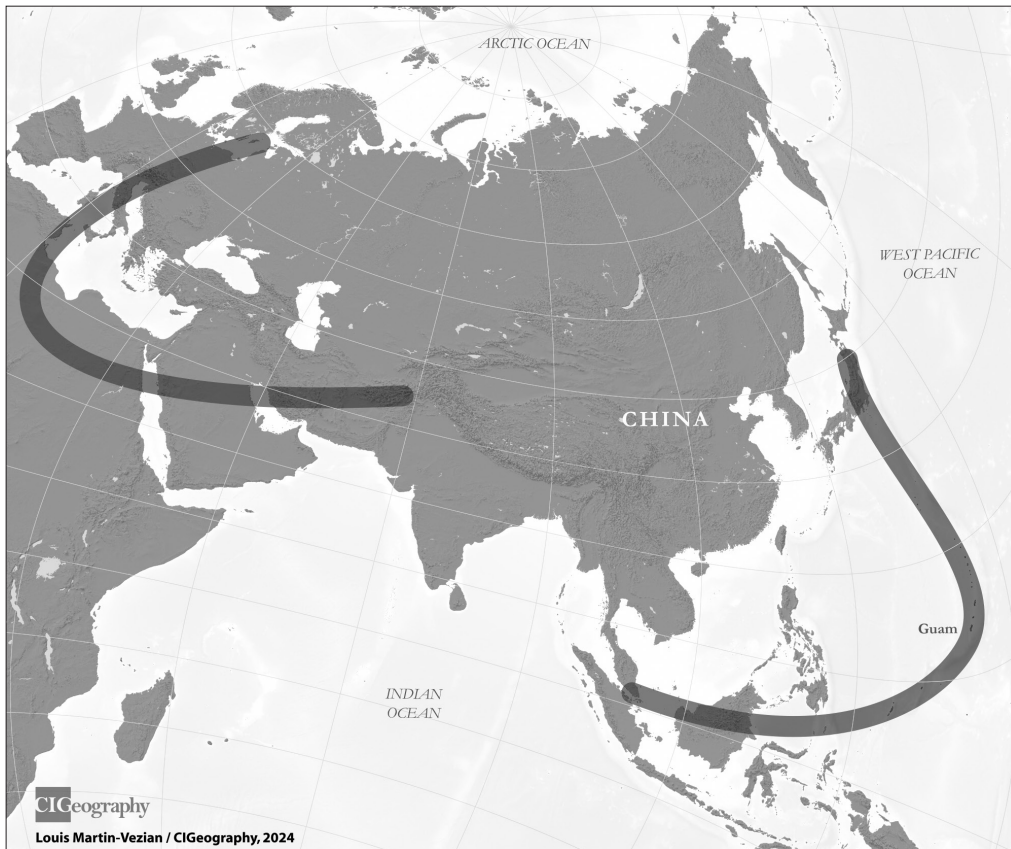
²⁰ Ma Ping, “Guojia liyi yu junshi anquan” [National Interests and Military Security], 2005, quoted in Suzuki, “Kin’nren ni okeru Chugoku no gunji anzen hosho senmonka no senryaku ninshiki.”

²¹ The Quadrennial Defense Review from 2001 defines the “East Asian littoral” as “the region stretching from [the] south of Japan through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal.” U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C., September 2001), 2, 4, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2001.pdf?ver=Afts7axkH2zWUHncRd8yUg%3D%3D>.

at the same time increasing the U.S. presence in East Asia, where a nascent “encircling ring” was starting to take shape with Guam as its epicenter (see **Figure 2**).²² It was therefore “not difficult to see that what the United States is compressing in the western section of the strategic arc is precisely China and Russia’s strategic spaces, while its maneuvers in the western Pacific are intended for the eastern section of that strategic arc.”²³ The two-winged strategic pressure of NATO’s eastward expansion and the U.S. penetration into Central Asia, on the one hand, and of the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan military alliance in the Far East and the Pacific, on the other hand, posed “a serious threat to China’s security interests.”²⁴

Beijing’s perception of the United States’ hostile actions targeting China’s ideological, economic, and military strategic space reached another peak in 2009–11. Unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, Barack Obama’s expressed keenness to “strengthen and sustain” U.S. leadership in the

FIGURE 2 The U.S. encirclement “pincer”



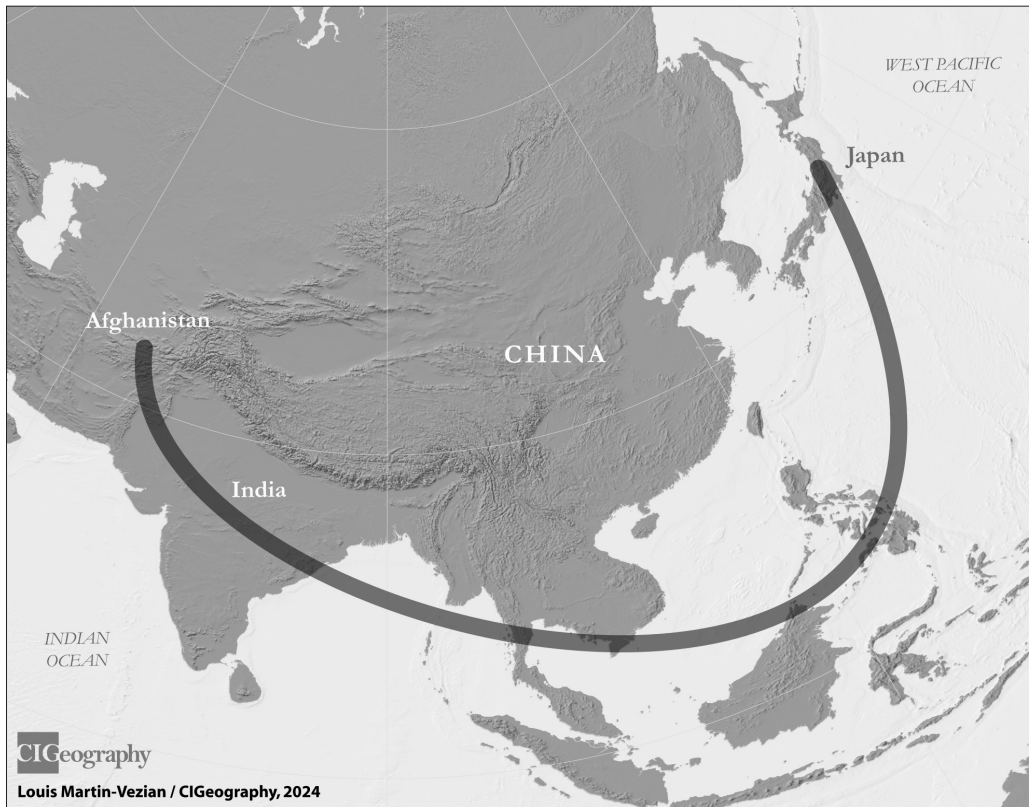
²² Guo Li, “Waijun guancha: Pandian Zhongguo zhoubian de Meiguo juli bushu” [Foreign Military Watch: Taking Stock of U.S. Military Forces’ Deployment in China’s Periphery], *Nanfang zhoumo*, August 25, 2005.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “Zhong E queding shouci lianhe junyan fang’an jiang lianhe kuozhan zhanlüe kongjian.”

Asia-Pacific,²⁵ a \$6.4 billion U.S. arms sales package to Taiwan, the U.S. Congress urging the executive branch to designate China as a currency manipulator,²⁶ and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, on top of increasing tensions in the South and East China Seas (e.g., the USNS *Impeccable* incident, U.S. military drills in the Yellow Sea, and flareups over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), were all seen as inauspicious manifestations of increased U.S. involvement in China's immediate periphery.²⁷ Evidently, scapegoating the United States as a hostile puppet master that is maneuvering to suppress China by all means necessary conveniently whitewashes the Chinese government's own shared responsibility in triggering some of these events. For some senior PLA officers, the physical proximity of the U.S. military presence, spanning from northern Japan, to South Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, India, and up to Afghanistan and Central Asia, was beginning to take the shape of an unwelcome C-shaped encirclement ring (see **Figure 3**).²⁸

FIGURE 3 The C-shaped encirclement



²⁵ Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall" (Tokyo, November 14, 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>.

²⁶ Wayne M. Morrison and Marc Labonte, "China's Currency: An Analysis of the Economic Issues," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RS21625, January 12, 2011, <https://china.usc.edu/sites/default/files/article/attachments/China%20Currency%202011%20Jan.pdf>.

²⁷ Xiuye Zhao, "Chinese Perception of the U.S. Strategic Position in East Asia: An Analysis of Civilian and Military Perspectives," *American Intelligence Journal* 30, no. 1 (2012): 45–54.

²⁸ Dai Xu, *C-xing baowei: Neiyao waihuan xia de Zhongguo tuwei* [C-Shaped Encirclement: China's Breakout of Encirclement under Internal Troubles and External Threats] (Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2010); and "Dai Xu: Mei liyong dui Hua C xing baowei quan buduan qiaozha xiepo Zhongguo" [Dai Xu: The United States Uses the Anti-China C-Shaped Encirclement to Blackmail and Coerce China], *Global Times*, March 1, 2010, available at <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2010-03-01/1116585449.html>.

This was reminiscent of the string of defense and security treaties the United States signed with Asian countries in the early 1950s as a barrier against Communist expansion in the region.²⁹ The compression of China's strategic space was not only of a military nature, facilitated by long-range air strikes and the U.S. ability to "choke China's lifeline at sea," but also part of a broader strategy that included "political, economic, and ideological efforts to force China into playing the role that the United States wants."³⁰ The Obama administration's decision to "pivot" or "rebalance" its military, diplomatic, and economic efforts to Asia only confirmed this analysis.

The Chinese strategic community was as displeased to see an increased U.S. presence in Eurasia in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks as it was to see the United States pack up and leave a decade later. In both cases, the U.S. decisions confirmed Chinese analysts in their predetermined conclusion: China was the main target of a deliberate U.S. encirclement campaign. After ten years of wars, which had taken a toll on U.S. resources and marred the country's international image, combined with the disastrous aftermath of the global financial crisis, the United States was now forced to operate a "strategic contraction"³¹ and a "strategic readjustment."³² It was abandoning its previous "double expansion plan" (greater Middle East and greater Central Asia) to focus instead on Asia and the western Pacific—a move the Chinese strategic community called "retreat from the west, advance eastward" (*xitui dongjin*).³³ Now that it had pulled out of Iraq and was planning to leave Afghanistan in July 2011, the United States was set on "devoting considerable energy to dealing with China" and containing its rise in the Pacific while preserving U.S. leadership over the region.³⁴ The United States would use every opportunity to "forestall the rise of China" and "choke" or "hinder" its development, "contain" its maritime interests, and "exploit" the conflicts with its neighbors to persuade them to join Washington's containment scheme while strengthening the United States' own regional alliances and dominance.³⁵

Everything the United States was doing, either at the Eurasian continent's western edge or on its eastern maritime flank, was an unsurprising continuation of the geostrategy it applied during the Cold War, meant to prevent any rising power from dominating Eurasia and from challenging its own hegemony. "Some people's bodies have entered the 21st century," wrote the *People's Daily's* Zhong Sheng in the summer of 2013, "but their head is still stuck in the past, stuck in the old era of colonial expansion, stuck in the old framework of Cold War mentality and zero-sum games."³⁶ In the final analysis, the so-called military "C-shaped encirclement" of China was only the "shallowest layer" of a comprehensive U.S. strategic containment that the Chinese leadership had

²⁹ Huang Yingxu, "C baoweiquan" [C Encirclement], *Window of the Northeast*, June 2010.

³⁰ This quote is from an interview about the C-shaped encirclement with Ni Lexiong, a professor at Shanghai University. See "Dai Xu: Mei liyong dui Hua C xing baoweiquan buduan qiaozha xiepo Zhongguo."

³¹ Ma Xin and Zhang Meng, "Zhuanfang junkong yu caijun xiehui Xu Guangyu: Zhongguo yao chu luan bu jing" [Exclusive Interview with Xu Guangyu, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Association: China Must Deal with Chaos without Panic], *Yicai*, December 30, 2011, available at <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20111230/011211096864.shtml?from=wap>.

³² Yang, "Qianxi Aobama zhengfu de quanqiu zhanlue tiaozheng." See also "Mei zhanlue tiaozheng, 'xitui dongjin' yu he wei?" [U.S. Strategic Readjustment: What Is the "Retreat from the West, Advance to the East" For?], *PLA Daily*, December 24, 2010, available at https://www.guancha.cn/america/2010_12_24_52579.shtml. See also Tang Yongsheng, a professor at the PLA National Defense University's Institute of Strategic Studies, in "Shijie junshi xingshi: Junshi jingzheng shengwen 'ruan zhanzheng' jian tuxian" [Global Military Situation: Military Competition Heating Up and "Soft War" Becoming Increasingly Prominent], *People's Daily*, December 28, 2011.

³³ Yang "Qianxi Aobama zhengfu de quanqiu zhanlue tiaozheng." See also "Mei zhanlue tiaozheng, 'xitui dongjin' yu he wei?"

³⁴ Ma and Zhang, "Zhuanfang junkong yu caijun xiehui Xu Guangyu."

³⁵ Zhao, "Chinese Perception of the U.S. Strategic Position in East Asia."

³⁶ Zhong Sheng, "Jiya lengzhan siwei kuozhan kongjian" [Squeezing the Cold War Mentality's Expansion Space], *People's Daily*, August 14, 2013. Zhong Sheng is homophonous to "the voice of China" or "sounding the alarm bell" and is a pen name for the *People's Daily* International Department, writing on important foreign affairs issues. See David Gitter and Leah Fang, "The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 69–112.

to break through.³⁷ Major General Peng Guangqian, deputy secretary-general of China's National Security Forum and co-editor of the *Science of Military Strategy*, commented in early 2014 that the reason for U.S. efforts to “build a new strategic containment system” had everything to do with the United States' unwillingness to recognize China's right to prosper and to respect it as an equal capable of choosing its own path and nothing to do with China's behavior. The senior strategic planner continued:

The United States is compressing China's strategic space, which is a major challenge for China in the new era. We cannot avoid this problem, nor can we retreat from it, nor can we close our eyes and pretend not to see it. We must face it squarely. One inevitable consequence of the United States taking China as the object of its global containment is that it has accelerated China's push into the global political arena and forced China to play on the global “great chessboard,” and to respond to the unprecedented strategic challenges facing its national security environment with a global perspective.³⁸

In other words, China's global expansion is justified by the necessity of leapfrogging beyond the U.S. encirclement wall. It so happened that it also is a “historic inevitability” because of China's growing power and expanding interests.³⁹

The Grammar of Expansion

Chinese theorists go to great lengths so as to not explicitly convey that what they have in mind is a significantly expanded Chinese realm. They unanimously resort to justifying expansion by presenting it as purely defensive and therefore not the same as Western expansionism or imperialism. Despite all their efforts to conceal it, the intent of Chinese theorists is unmistakable. True world powers, writes a PLA National Defense University professor, exercise global influence. Whereas China is still a regional power, it “inevitably” must expand its interests and influence beyond its original territory to a wider one.⁴⁰ A great nation like China “cannot be confined to a narrow space forever.”⁴¹ Historical precedents show that the options for rising powers are extremely limited: either they manage to break through containment to achieve their rise, or their ambitions are “stifled in the cradle by the hegemonic power.”⁴² The next question geostrategists need to address, then, is in which geographic direction should China choose to realize its “strategic breakthrough” in the face of U.S. containment.⁴³ Empire building has long lost its luster, but this is even more the case in a place and time that still bears the stigma of twentieth-century expansionism, colonialism, and territorial aggression. Instead, threats of alleged hostile

³⁷ Qiao Liang, “Yinmou yi cheng yangmou, Zhongguo ruhe tuwei?” [The Plot Has Become an Open Plan. How Does China Break Through It?] (speech at the 7th China Economic Growth and Economic Security Strategy Forum, Beijing, May 29, 2012), <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/53855.html>. See also “Dai Xu: Mei liyong dui Hua C xing baoweiquan buduan qiaozha xiepo Zhongguo.”

³⁸ Peng Guangqian, “Zhanlüe xichu: Yi zheng nengliang pingheng Meiguo zhanlüe dongyi de fu nengliang” [Strategic Westward: Balance the Negative Energy of the U.S. Strategic Eastward Shift with Positive Energy], *Jingji daokan* 3 (2014).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Zhou Bisong, *Zhanlüe bianjiang: Gaodu guanzhu haiyang, taikong he wangluo kongjian anquan* [Strategic Frontiers: Focusing Strongly on Maritime, Space, and Cyberspace Security] (Beijing: Long March Publishing House, 2015), cited in Suzuki, “Kin'n'en ni okeru Chugoku no gunji anzen hosho senmonka no senryaku ninshiki.”

⁴¹ Du Debin et al., “1990 nian yilai Zhongguo dilixue zhi diyuanzhengzhixue yanjiu jinzhan” [Progress in Geopolitics of Chinese Geographical Research since 1990], *Dili yanjiu* 34, no. 2 (2015).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

encirclement schemes provide Chinese theorists with an opportune, defensive justification for extending China's power. Another justification is the urge to defend the nation's growing interests, which conveniently favors the upgrading of PLA power-projection capacities. However, even those who emphasize the need to break through containment divulge little about the geographies where China should go next. Where to expand when every inch of available land is under sovereign control, the principle of sovereignty is universally entrenched, and national borders are fixed?

In May 2007 a top PLA Navy officer gave the first inkling of a potential Chinese exclusive sphere of influence to the then chief of U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Timothy Keating, who recalled his counterpart as saying: "You, the U.S., take Hawaii East and we, China, will take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean. Then you will not need to come to the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and we will not need to go to the eastern Pacific."⁴⁴ Perhaps this Yalta-like carving up of maritime occupation zones was what Xi Jinping had in mind when he assured Obama in 2013 that "the vast Pacific Ocean has enough space for two large countries like the United States and China."⁴⁵ But the maritime regions are not all that is included in China's mental strategic map. In the post-global financial crisis context, Chinese discussions about spatial expansion have been congregating around themes related to strategic territories, strategic directions, and "greater" space. Not all imagined strategic spaces for China are necessarily geographic either, as will be explained in the next chapter.⁴⁶ The following section presents a nonexhaustive list that is intended as an initial foray into some of the domestic deliberations related to spatial expansion.

Strategic New Frontiers/Territories

Writing about China's strategic space in 1987, Senior Colonel Xu Guangyu identified new expanses that he believed would be subject to humankind's further conquest, especially as the development of science and technology would enable their future exploitation. The high seas, polar regions, and outer space were natural spaces harboring "all sorts of riches." For now, they were free of control by anyone, but powerful nations were bound to intensely compete for them. As a result of filling these empty spaces, humankind would then enter a new stage of delineating strategic frontiers.⁴⁷

What U.S. sources call the "global commons" are usually described in Chinese writings as something akin to territories without a master—a *terra nullius* where humans have not left their mark yet, either by physical occupation or through law, or a blank slate full of promises, especially for a rising great power eager to exercise its dominion.⁴⁸ Military planners in Beijing mainly see them as domains prone to power competition.⁴⁹ In the words of the 2013 edition of the

⁴⁴ Manny Pubby, "China Proposed Division of Pacific, Indian Ocean Regions, We Declined: U.S. Admiral," *Indian Express*, May 15, 2009, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/china-proposed-division-of-pacific-indian-ocean-regions-we-declined-us-admiral>.

⁴⁵ "Chinese Leader Xi Jinping Joins Obama for Summit," BBC, June 8, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22798572>.

⁴⁶ Suzuki, "Kin'nen ni okeru Chugoku no gunji anzen hoshō senmonka no senryaku ninshiki."

⁴⁷ Xu Guangyu, "Extending Strategic Boundaries Past Geographic Borders," JPRS-CAR-88-016, March 29, 1988, 35–38, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA348698.pdf>.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Chen Yugang, "Zai gongyu lingyu Zhongguo bixu you ziji de zhanlüe kaolü" [China Must Have Its Own Strategic Considerations in Common Territories], *World Affairs* 18 (2015). For a broader discussion on how the PRC interacts with the global commons and attendant global governance regimes, see Carla P. Freeman, "An Uncommon Approach to the Global Commons: Interpreting China's Divergent Positions on Maritime and Outer Space Governance," *China Quarterly* 241 (2020).

⁴⁹ See, for example, Jiao Liang, "Yuzhou kongjian: Weilai guojia anquan 'xin bianjiang'" [Outer Space: "New Frontier" of Future National Security], *Xinan minbing* 6 (2007); and Major General Chen Zhou, quoted in "Zhuanjia: Daguó fēnfēn tiāozhēng jūnshì zhānlüè gōujian xīnxíng wēishè tǐxì" [Experts: Great Powers Are Adjusting Their Military Strategies and Building New Deterrence Systems], *People's Daily*, December 28, 2011, available at <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/2011/12-28/3564397.shtml>.

Science of Military Strategy, these areas are “hot spots for strategic struggles among countries.”⁵⁰ Great powers have seized “early opportunities” in these strategically important spaces, making it difficult, costly, and risky for latecomers such as China to access and use them.⁵¹ Jurists, on the other hand, consider them as legal blank slates that provide China with the opportunity to become a governance rule-maker, thereby gaining a “first-mover advantage” and enhancing its “discourse power.”⁵² Negotiating and deciding on global standards, rules, and regulations over spaces that are still relatively unexplored and unregulated gives China an opportunity “to be involved from the beginning and even take a dominating role.”⁵³

Reflecting the central leadership’s recognition of these spaces as crucially important, the July 2015 National Security Law included for the first time outer space, international seabed areas, and polar regions as spaces both that can be “peacefully explored and used” and where the state claims for itself the right to safeguard the security of national “activities and assets.”⁵⁴ Members of the Chinese Communist Party Standing Committee who drafted the law described these spaces jointly as China’s “strategic new frontiers/territories” (*zhanlüe xin jiangyu*).⁵⁵

In examining each of the three strategic new frontiers, Khyle Eastin, April Herlevi, and Camilla Sørensen make similar observations about how China’s efforts have incrementally moved from scientific research and exploration, motivated both by the prospect of mining critical resources and by China’s ambition to become a technological leader, to an increased interest in shaping the international rules and norms that will determine the future of how these spaces are accessed and used.⁵⁶ For great powers of the past, looking at new frontiers has often translated into territorial exploration followed by military conquest and settlements. Even with rapidly advancing technological progress, it is hard to imagine a short-term future with Chinese colonies living on a 12,000 mile–deep seabed or established somewhere in outer space. For now, the use of law may be the second-best option for China to claim a form of dominion over these domains.

Strategic Directions: “Advance Westward, Resist Eastward”

The perception of encirclement elicits the imperative of breakthrough. In the early months after Xi Jinping’s accession to power, the intellectual and security community was buzzing with discussions about the strategic directions Beijing should take in order to cut through the U.S.-led

⁵⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 74, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Zhang Zhijun and Liu Huirong, “Dangqian guoji fa kuaxueke rencai peiyang de xin renwu xin keti: Jiyu shenhai, jidi, waikong, wangluo deng ‘zhanlüe xin jiangyu’ de sikao” [New Tasks and New Topics for the Current Interdisciplinary Talent Training in International Law: Thinking about “Strategic New Territories” Such as the Deep Sea, Polar Regions, Outer Space, and the Internet], *People’s Forum* 3 (2021), https://aoc.ouc.edu.cn/_t719/2021/1122/c9821a357226/page.htm; and Chen, “Zai gongyu lingyu Zhongguo bixu you ziji de zhanlüe kaolü.”

⁵³ Camilla T.N. Sørensen, “The Polar Regions as New Strategic Frontiers for China,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, January 25, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-polar-regions-as-new-strategic-frontiers-for-china>.

⁵⁴ “National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China,” July 1, 2015, trans. China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/2015nsl>.

⁵⁵ “Guojia anquan fa cao’an ni zengjia taikong deng xinxing lingyu de anquan weihu renwu” [National Security Law Draft to Increase Security Maintenance Tasks in New Domains Such as Space], Xinhua, June 24, 2015, available at https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-06/24/content_2883509.htm.

⁵⁶ Khyle Eastin, “A Domain of Great Powers: The Strategic Role of Space in Achieving China’s Dream of National Rejuvenation,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, May 10, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/a-domain-of-great-powers-the-strategic-role-of-space-in-achieving-chinas-dream-of-national-rejuvenation>; April A. Herlevi, “China’s Strategic Space in the Digital Undersea,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, March 14, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-strategic-space-in-the-digital-undersea>; and Sørensen, “The Polar Regions as New Strategic Frontiers for China.”

comprehensive compression of China's strategic space.⁵⁷ According to Fudan University professor Qi Huaigao, the discussions converged around three main groups:

- Advocates of a maritime breakthrough pointed to the priority given by the political leadership to transforming China into a maritime power. They believed that, as a response to the “joint blockade imposed by external powers and some of our maritime neighbors,” China's main strategic direction should be toward the South Pacific and eastern Indian Ocean in order to secure the western Pacific.
- Proponents of an “active westward advance” (*jiji xijin*), on the other hand, favored a continental breakthrough. They considered the economically strategic regions of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East as crucial to broaden China's strategic space on its western flank.
- A third group of strategic thinkers supported the idea of an “expansion of the exterior ring” (*waiwei kuozhan*). This is a large counter-encirclement strip including Latin America, Africa, Europe, and other relevant regions, which would outflank the U.S.-led encirclement centered on the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁸

Surveying China's strategic environment, it became clear that each cardinal direction needed to be included, while at the same time approached differently—a situation that was soon encapsulated as “*dongwen, beiqiang, xijin, nanxia*”: stability in the east (managing the relationship with the United States and its Asia-Pacific allies who are collectively containing China); strengthening the north (consolidating China's partnership with Russia); advancing westward (in Central Asia and West Asia for energy, security, and trade); and going down south (boosting cooperation with developing countries in Africa and Latin America).⁵⁹

For some analysts, the scarcity of available resources demanded that China concentrate first on regions that would be least resistant to its expansion before spreading to other areas, working outward from near to far, first “from point to line,” then “from line to surface.” Africa and, albeit to a lesser degree, Latin America and Europe appeared as the best candidates at the global level. Rich in the natural resources China needed, the African continent was also located west of “the center of the 21st-century geopolitical stage, the Indian Ocean,” and east of the North Atlantic, “the psychological frontier of the Western world.” In the long term, China's entry into the Atlantic Ocean could become key to “easing the strategic pressure from the West, and Africa could then become a potent springboard.” At the regional level, the direction of the breakthrough would be determined by the candidates' cultural proximity and strategic alignment with China. Beijing should therefore pick Pakistan, Myanmar, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan, which would be “treated like the United States treats Mexico and Canada.”⁶⁰

Proponents of a continental advance toward the west took stock of the increased pressure on China's eastern maritime flank to propose a “rebalancing” of China's geostrategy. A smart fighter, observes general Peng Guangqian, always dodges first when faced with an onrushing opponent. As

⁵⁷ Peng Nian, “Zhongguo weilai zhanlüe jueze: Xijin? Nanjin?” [China's Future Strategic Choice: Go West? Head South?], Tianda Institute, January 15, 2013.

⁵⁸ Qi Huaigao, “Goujian mianxiang weilai shinian de ‘da zhoubian wajiao zhanlüe’” [Building a “Greater Periphery Diplomatic Strategy” for the Upcoming Decade], *World Knowledge* 4 (2014).

⁵⁹ “Zhuanjia tan Zhongguo quanqiu zhanlüe: Ying dong wen, bei qiang, xi jin, nan xia” [Experts Discuss China's Global Strategy: It Needs Stability in the East, Strength in the North, Advance toward the West, and Go Down South], Xinhua, December 18, 2012, <https://chinanews.com.cn/mil/2012/12-18/4416116.shtml>. See also Ma Xiaojun, “Zhongguo tese daguo wajiao zhanlüe lunkuo xianxian” [The Outline of a Great Power Diplomacy Strategy with Chinese Characteristics Has Emerged], *Contemporary World*, February 2015.

⁶⁰ Du Debin and Ma Yahua, “Zhongguo jueqi de guoji diyuanzhanlüe yanjiu” [International Geostrategic Research on the Rise of China], *World Regional Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012).

the U.S. compression of China's strategic space was materializing in the east, China had to sidestep and move west. The world would be "too big for the United States to cover with one hand." China would strengthen its relations with Russia and Central Asian countries in the northwest, while in the southwest strategic direction it would develop friendly relations with South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Africa.⁶¹ Using a similar tai chi metaphor, General Qiao Liang also describes China's pivot to the west as a response to the U.S. compression: "I go west, neither to avoid you nor because I'm afraid of you, but to skillfully dissolve the pressure you bring to bear on me from the east."⁶²

Advancing westward was not a new idea, at least not for military thinkers. As early as 2001, PLA political commissar and general Liu Yazhou had asserted that it was nothing less than a "historical necessity for the Chinese nation, and it is also our destiny."⁶³ Liu advocated setting up trading hubs in the border regions with Central Asia, which would ultimately form a "greater Euro-Asian symbiotic economic belt," and using economic interdependence and common interests with the countries to the west of China in order to "dismantle the U.S. encirclement" of the country.⁶⁴ Liu reiterated the same point about China's historical destiny in a short paper published in 2010, adding that "we should think of the west not as a frontier, but as the heartland of our advance." This strategic direction followed the principle of "least resistance," especially at a time when China's "relations with Russia, the Central Asian states, Pakistan, and Iran are at their best in history."⁶⁵ Another article published in 2005 by a military magazine recommended breaking the U.S. containment by first focusing on China's western flank. This maneuver would give the PLA Navy enough time to strengthen its capabilities before pivoting to the east in order to eventually break through the island chains—a scheme the author summed up as "advance westward, defend eastward" (*xijin dongyu*).⁶⁶ Whereas Senior Colonel Dai Xu, a PLA officer well known for his nationalistic positions, pressed China to "unite with Russia and other forces, resolutely block the imminent war of the United States against Syria, and support Iran's just position so as to keep one U.S. foot firmly stuck in the Middle East,"⁶⁷ Peking University professor Wang Jisi argued that "marching westward" would widen China's room for strategic maneuver by nurturing the potential for U.S.-China cooperation on issues such as investment, energy, terrorism, nonproliferation, and regional stability, instead of calling attention to the more confrontational stance on China's maritime approaches.⁶⁸ Increased Chinese diplomatic, economic, and trade activities with nations of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East would develop along a three-pronged "new Silk Road" starting from China, both on land via Eurasia and at sea through the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹

The idea was worth pondering. When a group of high-level academic experts from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and top universities met in March 2013 to exchange their views

⁶¹ Peng, "Zhanlüe xichu: Yi zheng nengliang pingheng Meiguo zhanlüe dongyi de fu nengliang."

⁶² "Mei dong yi wo xi jin: Zhong Mei boyi zhi Zhongguo zhanlüe jueze" [America Moves East While We Move West: China's Strategic Choice in the China-U.S. Contest], *Huanqiu*, May 3, 2015.

⁶³ Liu Yazhou, "Da guo" [The Grand National Strategy], 2001, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/2884.html>. An English translation by Ted Wang can be found in *Chinese Law and Government* 40, no. 2 (2007).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Liu Yazhou, "Xi bu lun" [The Westward Theory], *Phoenix Weekly*, August 5, 2010.

⁶⁶ Wang, "Zhongguo nengfou chongpo 'ezhi liantiao?'"

⁶⁷ Dai Xu, "Meiguo weidu zhixia, Zhongguo xin de zhanlüe kongjian zai nali" [Under American Containment, Where Is China's New Strategic Space?], *Aisixiang*, December 20, 2012, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/60073.html>.

⁶⁸ Wang Jisi, "'Xijin,' Zhongguo diyuanzhanlüe de zai pingheng" ["Advancing Westwards": China's Geostrategic Rebalancing], *Huanqiu*, October 17, 2012, available at <https://news.sina.cn/sa/2012-10-17/detail-ikmzxzfmk1459775.d.html>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

on the matter, they found themselves mostly in agreement with the general idea and acknowledged that advancing westward would broaden China's strategic space and relieve the pressure Beijing was experiencing. Some participants even pointed out that this was an inevitable choice for China on the road to become a world power. However, they diverged on two main points. First, some of these experts cautioned that openly using the term "advance" would generate misunderstandings and negative perceptions of China's objectives. They suggested refraining from implementing this new strategy in a high-profile manner. The second point of divergence was the imagined geographic extent included in the term "west." Whereas a representative from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) suggested that the concept was not strictly geographic and included the entire developing world rather than just Central Asia and the Middle East, others delineated its boundaries up to the Persian Gulf and North Africa, and some even included the African continent.⁷⁰ Wang Jisi himself supported the idea of a "further broadening of our horizons" that would be worthy of the global power rank China was now seeking.

Listing the challenges ahead, the scholars also reviewed the ways forward and suggested putting the emphasis on economic benefit and international cooperation, consolidating a "discourse system" that would prevent others from interpreting China's actions "at will," increasing domestic knowledge of the countries and regions west of China, and formulating a proper dedicated strategy including each subregion.⁷¹ Military strategists were enthused at the thought of increased access to the natural and energy resources of countries in Eurasia, including Russia and the Central Asian republics, as well as the Middle East and Africa. Developing economic cooperation and building transportation, energy, and power-generation infrastructure on the continent would help avoid the "interference and blockade" of maritime powers. Building railways and pipelines was only one aspect of a major historical effort to "restructure the political, economic, and geographic center of the world."⁷²

Greater Periphery

The October 2013 central party conference on "periphery diplomacy work" (*zhoubian waijiao gongzuo*) signaled an important shift in China's foreign policy outlook. It was the first top-level meeting of its kind dedicated to the region surrounding China. The two-day session was chaired by Xi Jinping and attended by all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, along with representatives of key central foreign affairs party-state departments and ambassadors. It followed a series of study sessions specifically focused on China's diplomatic and maritime strategy the Politburo held throughout that year and came on the heels of Xi's launch of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road during his maiden trip to Southeast Asia just a few weeks earlier and the introduction of the Silk Road Economic Belt during a speech in Kazakhstan in early September. The central conference underlined with great clarity that Beijing now saw regions "around [China's] borders" as "strategically significant" not only because of their geographic proximity,

⁷⁰ Nadège Rolland, "A New Great Game? Situating Africa in China's Strategic Thinking," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 91, June 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-new-great-game-situating-africa-in-chinas-strategic-thinking>.

⁷¹ Zhan Shiming, "Zhongguo de 'xijin' wenti: Yanpan yu sikao" [The Issue of China's "Westward Advance": Study and Reflections], *West Asia and Africa* 2 (2013).

⁷² Wang, "Hou Meiguo shidai' Zhongguo de dazhanlüe."

but also because of their political and economic relations with China.⁷³ The meeting laid the groundwork for the direction that Beijing's regional diplomacy would henceforth take.

Several foreign analysts noted the exceptional character of the gathering, but they mostly concluded that it reflected Beijing's willingness to pursue the "good and friendly neighborhood diplomacy" (*mulin youhao waijiao*) that Deng Xiaoping had started implementing in the early 1990s, at a time when the country was experiencing post-Tiananmen international isolation.⁷⁴ The Chinese Communist Party's November 2002 Congress Report had already elevated China's neighboring countries as "paramount" to its diplomatic approach, and Wen Jiabao had introduced the trilogy of *mulin*, *anlin*, *fulin* (harmonious/amicable, secure/tranquil, and prosperous neighbors/neighborhood environment) in an ASEAN meeting in Bali in late 2003.⁷⁵ These earlier modifications of China's official diplomatic guidelines had illustrated that instead of engaging on a bilateral basis with a select number of neighbors, Beijing had begun to consider them as an integrated whole. This approach had translated into the emergence of an "omnidirectional" peripheral diplomacy. The 2013 conference signaled a continuation of the long-held position that China needed to foster a stable external regional environment in order to maintain the course of its domestic economic and political development. Then, as before, Beijing's objective was to reassure its neighbors about its own growing power while forestalling the creation of coalitions aimed at balancing its power.⁷⁶ In addition, contrary to his predecessors and in a stark departure from Deng's "keep a low profile" motto, Xi seemed intent on proactively shaping the regional order and asserting China's leadership role in Asia.⁷⁷

Chen Xulong, the director of the Department for International and Strategic Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, a center affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concurs with most of his foreign colleagues' analysis. However, he also indicates that "tak[ing the] initiative in creating a favorable periphery" is not the Chinese leadership's ultimate aim, even though it is very important for reassuring China's neighbors in the face of its growing power and tackling the challenge posed by the U.S. rebalance, which "constitutes a disturbance to China's strategy in Asia." The periphery is in fact "vital for China to be a global power in a real sense" and "will serve as a springboard for China to go global and play its role of a responsible

⁷³ "Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotan hui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Conference on Periphery Diplomacy Work], Xinhua, October 25, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm.

⁷⁴ For an in-depth overview of China's diplomacy toward its neighbors during the first decade following Tiananmen, see Suisheng Zhao, "China's Periphery Policy and Its Asian Neighbors," *Security Dialogue* 30, no. 3 (1999): 335–46. See also Wang Guanghou, "Cong 'mulin' dao 'mulin, anlin, fulin': Shi xi Zhongguo zhoubian waijiao zhengce de zhuanbian" [From "Good Neighbor" to "Harmonious, Secure, and Prosperous Neighborhood": An Analysis of the Transformation of China's Peripheral Foreign Policy], *Diplomatic Review* 3 (2007); and Zhang Chi, "Historical Changes in Relations between China and Neighboring Countries (1949–2012)," Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper, March 2013.

⁷⁵ "Wen Jiabao zongli chuxi dongmeng shangye yu touzi fenghui bing fabiao yanjiang" [Premier Wen Jiabao Attended the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit and Delivered a Speech], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), October 8, 2003. Xi Jinping reiterated the same trilogy at the November 2014 Central Conference on Foreign Affairs Work. See "Xi Jinping chuxi zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [Xi Jinping Attended the Central Conference on Foreign Affairs Work and Delivered an Important Speech], Xinhua, November 29, 2014, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm.

⁷⁶ Bonnie Glaser and Deep Pal, "China's Periphery Diplomacy Initiative: Implications for China Neighbors and the United States," China-U.S. Focus, November 7, 2013, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinas-periphery-diplomacy-initiative-implications-for-china-neighbors-and-the-united-states>; Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2014/07/chinese-views-and-commentary-on-periphery-diplomacy?lang=en>; Jianwei Wang and Tiang Boon Hoo, eds., *China's Omnidirectional Peripheral Diplomacy*, Series on Contemporary China 45 (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018); and Jacob Stokes, *China's Periphery Diplomacy: Implications for Peace and Security in Asia*, Special Report 467 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2020), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200520-sr_467-chinas_periphery_diplomacy_implications_for_peace_and_security_in_asia-sr.pdf.

⁷⁷ Timothy Heath, "Diplomacy Work Forum: Xi Steps Up Efforts to Shape a China-Centered Regional Order," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, November 7, 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/diplomacy-work-forum-xi-steps-up-efforts-to-shape-a-china-centered-regional-order>.

world power.”⁷⁸ Stepping into the periphery is just a means toward a strategic end of China becoming a global power.

Discussion of strategic intent aside, few if any foreign analysts of Chinese politics commented on what the periphery (*zhoubian*) included. Most of them used the term as an equivalent to “region” or “neighborhood” (which seems to be the PRC’s preferred official English translation), referring either to the countries that share a land or maritime border with China or to Asia. Also setting aside the obvious observation that the term “periphery” inherently implies the existence of a core—hence, tacitly asserting China’s self-positioning at its center—an examination of China’s strategic space would be remiss if it did not question which countries or regions belong to the periphery.

Whereas the notion of strategic space originated from Chinese military thinkers, the conceptualization of China’s extended periphery is a brainchild of national security and intelligence circles. In 2004, at the time when domestic discussions of Russia’s “squeezed” strategic space started to emerge, and Hu Jintao was giving new historic missions to the PLA and talking about building a “harmonious world,” the *World Knowledge* journal published an article entitled “Interpreting China’s Greater Periphery.”⁷⁹ Three of the four experts interviewed in the article worked for CICIR, a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security: Lu Zhongwei, a Japan expert who became president of CICIR in 2003 and was appointed vice minister of the Ministry of State Security in 2011; Fu Mengzi, the current vice-president of CICIR, who was then director of its Institute of American Studies; and Chen Xiangyang, an analyst then working for CICIR’s Security and Strategy Institute who later became director of its World Politics Institute.⁸⁰

The article makes a clear distinction between neighborhood and periphery and notes that the emergence of the concept of greater periphery reflects the evolution of China’s own development. Lu explains that the traditional understanding of what is a neighbor for China is no longer valid. Rather than being based on whether a country shares a land or maritime border with China, it should take into account whether a country shares interests with and is connected to China by security, economic, trade, energy, and cultural ties. The countries China counts as its neighbors should therefore be considered as akin to “distant relatives” (*yuan qin*) and be construed as “neighbors in the distance” (*lin juli*). From this perspective, developing countries naturally fall in that category. In a separate article published in 2005, Lu states that countries such as Mexico, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Island states should henceforth be counted as China’s neighbors.⁸¹

Some of his colleagues at CICIR, such as Dao Shulin, Lin Limin, and Wang Zaibang, generally agreed that China’s periphery includes the Eurasian continent as well as the Pacific and Indian

⁷⁸ Chen Xulong, “Xi Jinping Opens a New Era of China’s Periphery Diplomacy,” *China-U.S. Focus*, November 9, 2013, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/xin-jinping-opens-a-new-era-of-chinas-periphery-diplomacy>.

⁷⁹ Lu Zhongwei et al., “Jiedu Zhongguo da zhoubian” [Interpreting China’s Greater Periphery], *World Knowledge* 24 (2004).

⁸⁰ The fourth expert quoted is Zhang Yunling, director of the Institute of Asia Pacific Studies at CASS and a member of the 10th, 11th, and 12th Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference national committee, a central organ of the united front work system and of its Foreign Affairs Committee.

⁸¹ Lu Zhongwei, “Zhongguo ‘da zhoubian’ didai gezhong liliang fenhua zuhe taishi” [The Differentiation and Combination of Various Forces in China’s “Greater Periphery” Zone], *Aisixiang*, March 13, 2005, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/6070.html>. Ruan Zongze, vice-president of the China Institute of International Studies, agrees with Lu Zhongwei that the greater periphery includes not only countries directly adjacent to China but also those that share interests with China. Instead of Latin America and Oceania, however, Ruan includes the European Union in China’s “peripheral extension.” See Ruan Zongze, “Suzao you liyu Zhongguo fazhan de da zhoubian huanjing” [Shaping a Greater Periphery Environment Conducive to China’s Development], *Aisixiang*, March 13, 2005, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/6071.html>.

Ocean rims.⁸² According to CICIR colleague Chen Xiangyang, China's periphery appears more geographically bounded and is divided into three levels:

- The neighborhood (i.e., countries sharing a maritime or land border with China).
- The “minor periphery” (*xiao zhoubian*) (i.e., the four subregions where China's neighbors are located: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia).
- The “greater periphery” (*da zhoubian*) (i.e., the regions extending outward from the minor periphery—including both the Middle East to the west, connected to Central and South Asia, and the South Pacific to the east, connected to Southeast Asia.⁸³

To Chen, the periphery is both where China's power, influence, and interests are located and a necessary connection toward its rise from a regional to a global power.⁸⁴ Throughout the decade following this 2004 article, he regularly reiterated that these six subregions or “plates” are included in China's “greater periphery” and urged Beijing to design a dedicated strategy to better integrate them in support of China's leading position on the global stage.⁸⁵

By the time that Xi chaired the central conference in 2013, the greater periphery formulation and its underlying expansionist vision had been largely adopted by political and intellectual elites connected to the political power centers.⁸⁶ Rather than covering “six plates,” CICIR vice-president Yuan Peng describes the greater periphery as China's gateway to “dash out of Asia and walk into the world,” conceived as three concentric circles with China as the core (see **Figure 4**):

- The “inner ring” comprises China's fourteen land neighbors, which are of paramount importance, both for geopolitical and historical reasons.
- The “middle ring” includes China's maritime neighbors that extend from the “inner ring” as well as the maritime area spanning from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and the parts of Central Asia and Russia that are not directly adjacent to China's land borders.
- The “outer ring” embraces Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the polar regions.

To emphasize the concentric circle structure of the greater periphery is not to “infinitely expand the connotation of China's periphery or to equate ‘global’ with ‘peripheral,’” cautions Yuan. At the same time, the concentric circles may stretch outward depending on the speed and rhythm of China's strategic development. Writing in late 2013, Yuan asserted that the focus of China's periphery strategy “should still be between the inner ring and the middle ring,” which

⁸² “2005 nian shijie dashi qianzhan” [World Situation Outlook, 2005], *Contemporary International Relations* 1 (2005): 11–15.

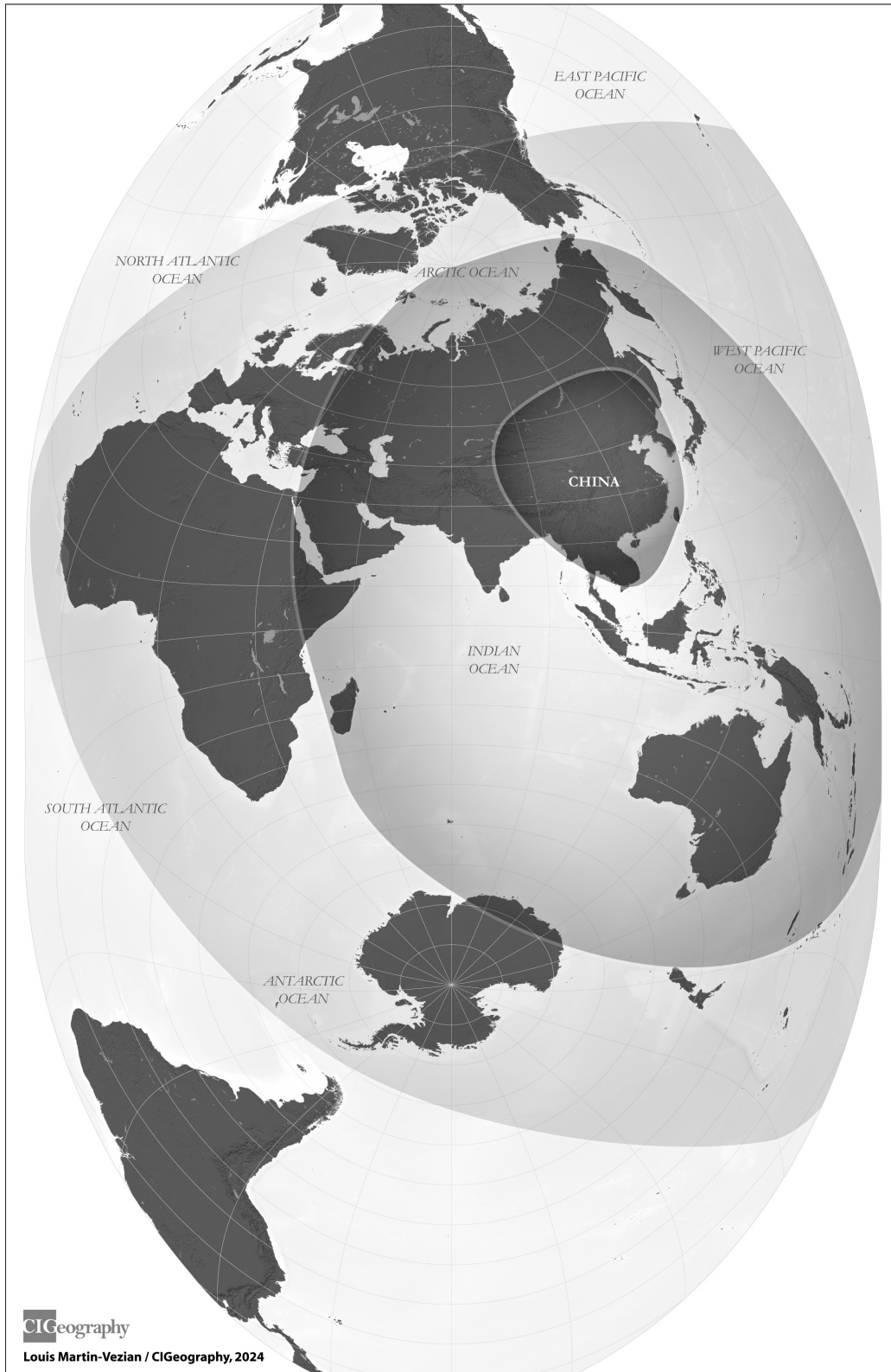
⁸³ Lu, “Jiedu Zhongguo da zhoubian.”

⁸⁴ The view of the periphery both as key to China's national interests and as a springboard for China's rise as a global power is shared by many Chinese scholars. See, for example, Zhang Jian, “Zhongguo zhoubian waijiao zai sikao” [Rethinking China's Periphery Diplomacy], *Contemporary World* 6 (2013).

⁸⁵ Chen Xiangyang, “Yingdui ‘da zhoubian’ liu bankuai” [Dealing with the “Greater Periphery's” Six Plates], *Liaowang*, August 21, 2010; “Guanyu woguo zhoubian xingshi” [The Situation in China's Periphery], Current Affairs Report, November 12, 2011; “Dui Zhongguo zhoubian huanjing xinbianhua de zhanlüe sikao” [Thinking Strategically about the New Changes in China's Peripheral Environment], *Yafei zongheng* 1 (2012); and “Zhongguo tuijin ‘da zhoubian zhanlüe’ zhengdangshi” [Now Is the Time for China to Promote Its “Greater Periphery Strategy”], Cfsnet, January 16, 2015.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the October 2013 special issue of the journal published by CICIR, which invited over 20 experts and scholars from leading academic institutions across the country to tackle the question of greater periphery, “Zhoubian zhanlüe xingshi yu Zhongguo zhoubian zhanlüe” [Strategic Situation in the Periphery and China's Periphery Strategy], *Contemporary International Relations* 10 (2013); Qi Huaigao and Shi Yuanhua, “Zhongguo de zhoubian anquan tiaozhan yu da zhoubian waijiao zhanlüe” [Security Challenges in China's Periphery and Greater Periphery Diplomatic Strategy], *World Economics and Politics* 6 (2013); and Ling Shengli, “Zhongguo zhoubian diqu haiwai liyi weihu tantao” [Discussion on Safeguarding Overseas Interests in China's Peripheral Regions], *International Development* 1 (2018): 31–50, <https://www.siis.org.cn/updates/cms/old/UploadFiles/file/20180117/201801004%20%E5%87%8C%E8%83%9C%E5%88%A9.pdf>.

FIGURE 4 Concentric circles of China's strategic space



are precisely the regions of the periphery targeted by the recently launched continental “belt” and maritime “road.”⁸⁷

Strategic Space Meets Belt, Road

Discussions about strategic directions and greater periphery end up delineating similar mental maps of what constitutes China’s strategic space. The overall vision is neither narrowly focused on East Asia nor fully global. It starts with the premise of a stable north (a nonadversarial Russia) and the need to break through a perceived encirclement that mostly manifests itself on China’s eastern flank. It is usually described in concentric circles with China at the core, a 360-degree perspective that includes both maritime and continental regions.

If we were to draw a Venn diagram, which spaces would be included by all groups of strategic thinkers? The result would embrace a vast continental and maritime expanse, starting with the Eurasian continent, including Southeast, South, Central, and West Asia, sometimes expanding toward and including Africa, perhaps Europe too, as well as the Eurasian continent’s adjacent waters—the South Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Arctic and Antarctic Oceans, sometimes expanding toward the Atlantic. CASS researcher Xing Guangcheng describes it as the “pan-Eurasian continent,” which refers to the Eurasian continent as well as North and East Africa, and connects the Pacific, Arctic, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans.⁸⁸ Rather than as an Asian power, China’s future is described as a sort of “Eurasian power plus.” What happens beyond this already massive space is left unresolved.

When Xi Jinping announced in Kazakhstan and Indonesia China’s interest in building a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which have since been branded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), he effectively set in motion the materialization of China’s future expanded realm. The overall strategic direction toward the west was confirmed as key to provide the strategic space the country needed.⁸⁹ Initially centered on the Eurasian continent and the Indian Ocean, BRI expanded to an additional outer ring after the first Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 that incorporated Africa, Latin America, the Arctic region, and the Pacific Islands.⁹⁰ The 2013 and 2017 BRI maps can be interpreted as delineating the concentric circles—the core and outer perimeters—of China’s strategic space, including both the surrounding continental and maritime regions, as demands China’s self-proclaimed identity as a composite land-sea power.

Chinese analysts immediately recognized what most foreign observers still do not—that BRI is not simply an infrastructure-building program but is “of great significance to ensure our strategic security, expand our strategic space, stabilize our energy supply, ensure our economic security, and

⁸⁷ Yuan Peng, “Guanyu xin shiqi Zhongguo da zhoubian zhanlüe de sikao” [Reflections on China’s Periphery Strategy in the New Era], *Contemporary International Relations* 10 (2013).

⁸⁸ Xing Guangcheng, “Lijie Zhongguo xiandai sichouzhi lu zhanlüe” [Understanding China’s Modern Silk Road Strategy], *World Economics and Politics* 12 (2014).

⁸⁹ Hua Yiwen, “Xi Jinping ‘liang Ya xing’ kuozhan Zhongguo zhanlüe kongjian” [Xi Jinping’s “Two Asian Trips” Broaden China’s Strategic Space], *People’s Daily* (international edition), September 10, 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0910/c136457-25630681.html>.

⁹⁰ The Chinese government released the “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative” in June 2017, which introduced the concept of three ocean-based “blue economic passages” linking (1) China to Africa and the Mediterranean via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, (2) China to Oceania and the South Pacific, and (3) China to Europe via the Arctic Ocean (called either the Arctic or Polar Silk Road). See “China Proposes ‘Blue Economic Passages’ for Maritime,” *Xinhua*, June 21, 2017, available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-06/21/content_29825517.htm. For a discussion of the South Pacific as part of China’s imagined strategic space, see Peter Connolly, “China’s Quest for Strategic Space in the Pacific Islands,” *NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space*, January 16, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-quest-for-strategic-space-in-the-pacific-islands>.

break through the strategic encirclement that contains our country.”⁹¹ It indicates the “geographic direction for China’s global strategy in the 21st century” and signifies the rejection of the idea of China as a regional power, in favor of a direct transition to the global level.⁹²

⁹¹ Zhao Zhouxian and Liu Guangming, “Yidai yilu: Zhongguo meng yu shijie meng de jiaohui qiaoliang” [Belt and Road: A Bridge between the China Dream and the World Dream], *People’s Daily*, December 24, 2014, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2014/1224/c1004-26263778.html>. For more discussions about BRI as a geostrategic project, see, among others, Du Debin and Ma Yaha, “Yidai yilu: Zhonghua minzu fuxing de diyuan dazhanlüe” [One Belt and One Road: The Grand Geostrategy of China’s National Rejuvenation], *Geographical Research* 34, no. 6 (2015); Ling Shengli “Yidai yilu’ zhanlüe yu zhoubian diyuan chongsu” [The “Belt and Road” Strategy and the Geopolitical Reshaping of the Periphery], *International Relations Studies* 1 (2016); and Li Xiao and Li Junjiu, “Yidai yilu’ yu Zhongguo diyuan zhengzhi jingji zhanlüe de chonggou” [“Belt and Road” and the Reshaping of China’s Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Strategies], *World Economics and Politics* 10 (2015).

⁹² Du and Ma, “Yidai yilu: Zhonghua minzu fuxing de diyuan dazhanlüe.”

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CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: A New Map?

After examining a 40-year discussion involving a multitude of voices, as this report has endeavored to do, it appears with greater clarity that the significance of “strategic space” rests not so much in revealing Beijing’s plans for repeating old models of empire building, engaging in territorial conquest, or establishing overseas colonies, but rather in exposing how consumed its strategic and political elites have been with the idea of China’s return to the center of the world. While thinking about space, what Chinese analysts really talk about are changes in the structure of the international system that they believe will accompany China’s ascension as the world’s dominant power. Drawing the mental map of the realm that these thinkers believe China needs to ensure its long-term success is therefore a useful device to assess the extent of its leadership’s global ambitions.

Although most writings examined in this report fiercely deny any hegemonic aspiration on China’s part, this is in fact what would appear as the heart of the matter. In the words of a Renmin University professor, “Our question is whether China can become a global hegemon like the United States, and whether it is necessary for China to become a global hegemon similar to the United States.”¹ Lessons learned from the American historical experience may not be entirely replicable—especially those about invading other countries—but some may serve as an “inspiration” to China, notes a senior official of the Central Party School’s Institute for International Strategic Studies.² As exemplified by the 2021 China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) magnum opus on the rise and fall of great powers, both triumphant and cautionary tales of past rising powers continue to feed Chinese analyses eagerly seeking to find the secret ingredients required to become a successful hegemon.³ The fascination of prominent nationalist thinkers such as Jiang Shigong with empire is also symptomatic of an ongoing intellectual quest for the best course to organize and manage “the whole world” and accompany the historic return of the world’s center of gravity “to Eurasia and to the Eastern world.”⁴ Sifting through an abundant intellectual production, two intertwined conclusions also appear prominently: that China’s expansion is inevitable as a result of its growing power and interests, and that external pushback and efforts to contain this expansion are to be expected. As long as China remains the main contender, the “irreconcilable” nature of the China-U.S. rivalry is “doomed to perpetuate the historical curse of great powers’ struggle for hegemony.”⁵

Having reached its peak extension in 2013, the mental map of China’s strategic space has since been stable. The United States’ entry into great-power competition mode, a global pandemic,

¹ “Zhongguo de shijie zhixu xiangxiang yu quanqiu zhanlüe guihua’ yantao hui” [Seminar on “China’s Imagined World Order and Global Strategic Planning”], *Wenhua zongheng*, February 21, 2013, <http://www.21bcr.com/zhongguodeshijiezhixuxiangxiangyuanqiuqizhanlueguihuayantaoahui>.

² Chen Jimin, “Meiguo jueqi de jingyan yu qishi” [Experience and Lessons from the Rise of the United States], *China Investment* 17 (2018).

³ *Daguo xingshuai yu guojia anquan* [National Security and the Rise and Fall of Great Powers], CICIR, April 15, 2021. A summary of the book and its introduction translated by Dylan Levi King are available from the Center for Strategic Translation, <https://www.strategictranslation.org/articles/general-laws-of-the-rise-of-great-powers>. For additional comparative historical examples, see Woodruff D. Smith, “The Political Culture of Imperialism in the German Kaiserreich,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-political-culture-of-imperialism-in-the-german-kaiserreich>; Alexis Dudden, “Mental Maps, Territorial Imaging, and Strategy: Thinking about the Japanese Empire,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/mental-maps-territorial-imaging-and-strategy-thinking-about-the-japanese-empire>; Jeffrey Mankoff, “Constructing Russia’s Strategic Space: Empire, Identity, and Geopolitics,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/constructing-russias-strategic-space-empire-identity-and-geopolitics>; and Stephen Wertheim, “To the Grand Area and Beyond: The Sudden Transformation of the United States’ Strategic Space,” NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, August 23, 2023, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/to-the-grand-area-and-beyond-the-sudden-transformation-of-the-united-states-strategic-space>.

⁴ Jiang Shigong, “Meiyou diguo de diguo shi (‘Tiemu’er zhihou: 1405 nian yilai de quanqiu diguo shi’ tuijianxu)” [A History of Empire without Empire (Preface to “After Tamerlane: A History of Global Empires since 1405”)], *Aisixiang*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/125734.html>; and Jiang Shigong, “The Internal Logic of Super-Sized Political Entities: ‘Empire’ and World Order,” April 2019, trans. David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/jiang-shigong-empire-and-world-order.html>.

⁵ Zhang Hongming, “Da bianju beijingxia Zhongguo dui Feizhou de zhanlüe xuqiu” [China’s Strategic Requirements for Africa in the Context of the Great Changes], *Western Asia and Africa* 4 (2021).

and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have not markedly affected the expansionist imaginations of Chinese strategic elites. The space they consider vital to their country's survival and development has not shrunk as a result of the measures taken by the United States to deter China's maritime aggressiveness and limit its access to technologies, nor as a consequence of its own significant domestic economic challenges. To the contrary, these latest events are used as intellectual justifications for continued efforts to push outward.

What explains this absence of change mainly rests on a fundamentally unaltered strategic judgment about both U.S. and Chinese power. Although seemingly showing signs of decline for the better part of the last two decades, the United States is still the hegemon and continues to be perceived as eagerly pursuing a strategy of containment targeting China. China, on the other hand, continues to believe its power is rising and that, as all great powers before, it needs space to expand. The containment-expansion riddle will not come easily to a final resolution. In a rare explicit comment, Xi Jinping declared in March 2023 that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement, and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development."⁶ Unless and until China has fulfilled its "dream" of becoming the new dominant power, it will always feel constricted. And so the encirclement-counter-encirclement ouroboros endures.

Caught in the Containment Loop

The deployment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) starting at the end of 2013 did not magically dissolve the U.S. compression of China's strategic space. This should not be entirely surprising. Since BRI is an "overt scheme to become a great power,"⁷ the spine of a future China-centric order,⁸ and an attempt to redefine the global system that has introduced its own language and spatial structures,⁹ the initiative will take more than just a decade to eventually achieve its desired outcome. Russia's war in Ukraine has interrupted some of the initially envisaged corridors in Eurasia, but new connection points have been created, especially in the "three Souths" (South America, South Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa).¹⁰ Ten years after the launch of BRI, the Chinese government continues to officially describe it as a successful endeavor that has "further opened up the main arteries of economic globalization" and whose expansive geographic delineations remain intact:

The BRI has connected the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end, the developed European economic circle at the other, and the countries in between with huge potential for economic development, and fostered closer economic cooperation with African and Latin American countries. It has formed a new global development dynamic in which the Eurasian continent

⁶ John Ruwitch, "China Accuses U.S. of Containment and Warns of Potential Conflict," NPR, March 7, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/07/1161570798/china-accuses-u-s-of-containment-warns-of-potential-conflict>.

⁷ Xue Li, "Yidai yilu zhanlüe shi daguo yangmou" [The Belt and Road Strategy Is an Overt Scheme to Become a Great Power], *Financial Times* (Chinese edition), December 13, 2015, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001065182?full=y>.

⁸ Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: NBR, 2017); and Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 83, January 2020.

⁹ Nadine Godehardt, "China's Geopolitical Code: Shaping the Next World Order," NBR, Mapping China's Strategic Space, January 24, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-geopolitical-code-shaping-the-next-world-order>.

¹⁰ Huang Renwei, "Wukelan weiji dui 'yidai yilu' de diyuanzhengzhi jingji yingxiang" [Geopolitical and Economic Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on BRI], *Contemporary International Relations* 1 (2023).

is fully connected with the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic oceans, and the land is integrated with the sea.¹¹

Ten years on, Chinese political and strategic elites continue to construe the United States as principally motivated by a die-hard “Cold War mentality”¹² and a desire to thwart China’s rise with every means at its disposal, including by stirring up the “China threat theory” in continually renewed forms.¹³ The United States’ most recent efforts to uphold a “free and open” Indo-Pacific and its doubling down on commitments to regional allies and partners have “only reinforced the conviction [among well-connected authors in the Chinese strategic community] that the Indo-Pacific strategy was focused on containing China.”¹⁴ The consolidation, encouraged by the U.S. government, of a “great triangle” among Japan, Australia, and India around China’s most important access routes to the open oceans continues to apply a “two-way compression” on China’s strategic space in the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ The United States, which “cannot tolerate rivals,”¹⁶ is seen as “sparing no effort” in its attempts to contain China. This includes labeling China as the greatest challenge to the international order and using Taiwan, Xinjiang, and maritime issues to “interfere in China’s internal affairs,” as well as “forming cliques to contain and isolate China, and persisting in ‘choking’ and ‘derisking’ mainly the high-tech sector in order to suppress China’s industrial upgrading.”¹⁷ The United States is allegedly chipping away at China’s strategic space by developing global infrastructure programs that challenge BRI and by fomenting a “digital encirclement” of China that aims at subverting its domestic public opinion.¹⁸ Its efforts to “suppress and exclude” China are comprehensive and multilayered (encompassing economy and trade, finance, ideology, diplomacy, science and technology, and military affairs), and the pace of its strategic containment of China is accelerating.¹⁹ Notwithstanding the occasional creative semantic flourish, Chinese strategic elites in the post-pandemic era sound like a tiresome broken record on this issue.

The implicit linkage between China’s and Russia’s strategic spaces also endures, and the geostrategic importance of the Eurasian continent and its surrounding oceans, where great

¹¹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future* (Beijing, October 2023), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202310/10/content_WS6524b55fc6d0868f4e8e014c.html.

¹² “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on April 12, 2024,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), April 12, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347735.html.

¹³ For example, Jiang Feng, the party secretary of the Shanghai International Studies University, talks about NATO’s “strategic demonization of China.” See Tuvia Gering, “Crossing the Great Divide, Injecting New Blood, Strategic Demonization, and the Changing Balance of Power,” *Discourse Power*, August 23, 2023, <https://discoursepower.substack.com/p/discourse-power-august-23-2022>. For other examples, see “‘Sharp Power’ a New Version of ‘China Threat’ Rhetoric: Spokesperson,” *Xinhua*, March 2, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/02/c_137011743.htm; and Zhao Long, “Meiguo zhengzai mouhua xin ‘bianyuan didai’ zhanlüe” [The United States is Planning a New “Rimland” Strategy], *Huanqiu*, August 26, 2022.

¹⁴ Elliot S. Ji, “Chinese Perspectives on the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a Geostrategic Construct,” *NBR*, Mapping China’s Strategic Space, May 14, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinese-perspectives-on-the-indo-pacific-as-a-geostrategic-construct>.

¹⁵ Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, “Seizing on Weakness: Allied Strategy for Competing with China’s Globalizing Military,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2021, [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8239_\(Seizing_on_Weakness_Report\)_Web.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8239_(Seizing_on_Weakness_Report)_Web.pdf).

¹⁶ Wang Guifang, “Qianxi diyuanzhengzhi bianhua dui guojia anquan zhanlüe de yingxiang” [Brief Analysis of the Impact of Geopolitical Changes on National Security Strategy], *National Security Forum* 6 (2023).

¹⁷ Chen Xiangyang, “Xinshidai guojia anquan zhidu yu zhanlüe chuangxin huhang minzu fuxing” [In the New Era, National Security System and Strategic Innovation Escort National Rejuvenation], *National Security Studies* 5 (2023).

¹⁸ Huang, “Wukelan weiji dui ‘yidai yilu’ de diyuanzhengzhi jingji yingxiang.”

¹⁹ “Meiguo dui Hua kaiqi ‘dawei jiao’: Zhongguo ruhe fangfan?” [The United States Has Launched a “Great Encirclement and Annihilation” Campaign: How Can China Guard Against It?], *Guancha*, June 1, 2022, available at <https://military.china.com/news/13004177/20220601/42442377.html>; and Da Wei, “Zai dabianju zhong jianchi heping fazhan daolu” [Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development in the Context of Great Changes], Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University, July 13, 2022, <http://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zlyaq/5073>.

powers intersect, is still crucial.²⁰ This contested space is coveted by countries eager to extend their “geopolitical tentacles,” such as the nations of Europe; “shift East,” such as India and Russia; or link both Eastern and Western Eurasia through military arrangements, such as the United States and Japan.²¹ After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, containment themes and squeezed strategic space imagery reappeared in Chinese commentary as a justification for Moscow’s aggression. Some Chinese strategic analysts viewed the war as the “inevitable” result of the “sharp deterioration” of Russia’s strategic environment due to the West’s infringement on its strategic space. According to this narrative, the conflict was forced on Moscow, which could not possibly stay “indifferent” to this situation.²² A Russia subdued by the West would leave China’s northern defense line wide open, posing a considerable threat from a geopolitical perspective. Doing everything possible to consolidate Russia’s position is therefore “very much in line with China’s strategic interests and crucial to the global struggle against hegemony.”²³ In addition, the return of geopolitics to Europe has been accompanied by the foreseeable intensification of a Western narrative based on values and ideologies that oppose democracy to authoritarianism,²⁴ thereby deepening the division of the world into value-based opposing camps. With China pushed into the same dishonorable corner as Russia, its preexisting perception of vilification at the hands of the Western powers has solidified. Regardless of what happens on the ground in Ukraine, Chinese analysts continue to believe that their country is and will likely remain the primary target of the U.S. containment strategy.²⁵

Rising, Rising, Rising

Together with discussions of persistent containment schemes, political and strategic elites appear confident in the enduring trend of a narrowing power gap with the United States. Xi Jinping’s introduction of the idea that the world is undergoing “profound changes unseen in a century” at the ambassadorial work conference held in December 2017 reflects the leadership’s judgment of a forthcoming power shift. China is expected to replace the United States as the top world power, in part due to changes in comprehensive national power, globalization dynamics, and the impending fourth scientific and technological revolution. This judgment has not been subject to any significant revision since its pronouncement, even in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic or amid the pandemic’s lingering negative effects on the performance of the Chinese economy.²⁶ Bidding farewell to Vladimir Putin on the Kremlin doorstep last year, Xi told his

²⁰ Hu Zhiding and Wang Xuwen, “Daguo diyuanzhanlue jiaohuiqu de shikong yanbian: Tezheng, guili yu qi yuanyin” [Spatio-Temporal Evolution of Great Powers’ Geostrategic Confluence Zones: Characteristics, Principles, and Causes], *Tropical Geography* 39, no. 6 (2019).

²¹ Wang, “Qianxi diyuanzhengzhi bianhua dui guojia anquan zhanlue de yingxiang.”

²² Zhang Zhikun, “Lizu yuandong, Zhong E lianguo ying lianshou kaituo xin de zhanlue kongjian” [With a Foothold in the Far East, China and Russia Should Join Hands to Open Up a New Strategic Space], *Kunlunce*, July 1, 2023, <https://www.kunlunce.net/e/wap/show2022.php?bclassid=&classid=161&id=170166>.

²³ Zhang, “Lizu yuandong, Zhong E lianguo ying lianshou kaituo xin de zhanlue kongjian.” See also Frank Jüris, “How Chinese Strategists View, Understand, and Contend with Russia’s Strategic Space,” *NBR, Mapping China’s Strategic Space*, September 2024.

²⁴ Fu Yu, “Quanqiu anquan geju yu Zhongguo guoji zhanlue xuanze” [Global Security Structure and China’s International Strategic Choices], *Academic Frontiers*, February 2023.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Zhuanjia zonglun ‘yiqing hou shidai’ de Zhongguo yu shijie” [Experts Discuss China and the World in the “Post-Pandemic Era”], *China Daily*, April 20, 2020, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/20/WS5e9d45a9a310c00b73c784b6.html>; and “Zai dabianju zhong mou xinju de kexue zhinan” [A Scientific Guide to Creating a New Pattern Amidst the Great Changes], *Study Times*, November 11, 2020, available at <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/ll/2020/11-11/9335830.shtml>.

Russian counterpart: “Right now there are changes, the likes of which we haven’t seen for a hundred years, and we are the ones driving these changes together.”²⁷ China’s tenacious confidence in a narrowing power gap rests on believing that its GDP will surpass the United States’, albeit at a slightly delayed date that some CICIR analysts now expect to be around 2030.²⁸

More importantly, strategic elites continue to view U.S. power as embattled and being on a declining slope. China’s main rival is perceived as facing significant domestic and international challenges, such as social divisions, political polarization, deindustrialization, lack of firm Western alignment with its strategic interests, and recurrent discord with its partners and allies.²⁹ Not only is the United States failing to consolidate a Western bloc within which it could maintain its authority, but the overall decline of its hegemonic power during the second decade of the 21st century has led to modifications in the world structure that, in turn, are accelerating the erosion of its global leadership. Unlike in the past, the transformation of the international system is now originating from developing countries, outside of the remit of the “Western civilization,” who are “breaking the Western powers’ monopoly” over the international order.³⁰ While the power of the West continues to decline,³¹ the world is witnessing the formation of a growing “intermediate zone” where a wide variety of states with diverse political, social, and ideological systems congregate.³² For the foreseeable future, the trend is therefore not one in which the United States will be able to maintain or revive its global hegemony thanks to its alliance system, but one in which power is increasingly diffused and dispersed. Such an emerging strategic environment will affect the way great-power competition is played in the long term and offer China more strategic space, especially as this “middle zone” becomes “less tolerant of hegemonic power politics.”³³

Whether they observe the changes in the international configuration of power brought about by the incremental decline of American hegemony, the acceleration of Western economic decoupling and multiplication of trade and tech sanctions against China, or the need to loosen the concentration of U.S. containment in the Asia-Pacific region,³⁴ Chinese strategic thinkers reach the same conclusion as before: China needs to operate a counter-containment strategy, which requires the expansion of its strategic space.³⁵ Such an expansion is not limited to physical geographies

²⁷ “Xi Tells Putin They Are Making Historic Changes after Kremlin Meeting,” NBC News, March 23, 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aebFssopWVg>.

²⁸ This is according to a report published by CICIR’s Macroeconomics Research Group in February 2022, cited in Fu, “Quanqiu anquan geju yu Zhongguo guoji zhanlue xuanze.”

²⁹ Wang Wen, “Lun xinshidai de zhanlue jiyuqi: Yuanqi, xianzhuang yu weilai” [On the Strategic Opportunity Period in the New Era: Origin, Status Quo, and Future], *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism*, August 15, 2022, translation available from CSIS, Interpret: China, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/on-the-strategic-opportunity-period-in-the-new-era-origin-status-quo-and-future>. On the theme of the misalignment of strategic priorities and interests between the United States and its key partners, see Ji, “Chinese Perspectives on the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a Geostrategic Construct.”

³⁰ Zhang, “Da bianju beijingxia Zhongguo dui Feizhou de zhanlue xuqiu.”

³¹ Zhang Yunling, “Chongjian zhixu ying jiji tuidong shijie geju de jianbian” [Rebuilding the Order Requires Actively Pushing for Gradual Changes in the Global Structure], *Social Science Journal*, January 7, 2021; and Chen Xiangyang, “Xinxing guanzhuang feiyan yiqing jiang ling shijie duoji geju tiqian daolai” [The Novel Coronavirus Epidemic Will Bring About a Multipolar World Structure Ahead of Schedule], Sohu, June 21, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/403227941_116897.

³² Shi Yinhong, “Meiguo ji qita zhuyao guojia dui Hua zhengce yu weilai shijie geju” [The China Policy of the United States and Other Important Countries, and the Future World Structure], *International Security Studies* 6 (2020).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hu and Wang, “Daguo diyuanzhanlue jiaohuiqu de shikong yanbian”; and “Miandui Ouya bianju, zhoubian waijiao geng zhongyao” [In the Face of Changes in Eurasia, Periphery Diplomacy Becomes More Important], Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University, April 20, 2022, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zlyaq/4787>.

³⁵ Zhou Jianming, “Ezhi yu fan ezhi: Zhong Mei zhijian yi chang wufa bimian de zhanlue jiaoliang” [Containment and Counter-Containment: An Inevitable Strategic Contest between China and the United States], *Guancha*, April 10, 2023, https://www.guancha.cn/zhoujianming/2023_04_10_687692.shtml.

encompassing whole continents or even the entire developing world,³⁶ but also includes the economic and ideological realms in which China must exert its own influence.³⁷

China inaugurated its diplomatic transformation in 2013, notes Yan Xuetong, when the leadership decided to abandon the priority formerly given to eliciting an international peaceful environment conducive to China's economic development in favor of "shaping an international environment conducive to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Strategic rather than merely economic interests have since then guided China's external behavior—a transformation justified by China's growing comprehensive national power. Yan cautions, however, that overestimating China's power and setting overly ambitious goals could lead to "strategic overdraft," a fate shared by many aspiring or actual great powers in the past.³⁸ Examining the impact of the most recent geopolitical changes on China's national security strategy, Wang Guifang, a researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences Institute of War Studies, also warns that since such ambitions and "goals exist only in the imagination, they can be infinite." One may well dream of "setting a throne on the moon to enjoy the lovely view," but ultimately resources are limited, and this is an unwavering fact.³⁹ Renmin University professor Shi Yinhong echoes his colleagues' warnings about possible strategic overextension and advocates both prioritizing countries within BRI that will bring actual strategic, diplomatic, and economic benefits to China and prioritizing investment in handling the Taiwan issue and relations with the United States rather than in BRI. In the long run, he adds, China should rebalance its geostrategy and look "not only westward, but also eastward and northward" in the direction of Western Europe, North America, and Japan in order to maintain its access to advanced technology and markets.⁴⁰

A New Map?

Expressed concerns about potential overextension, especially at a time of increased domestic economic constraints, leave open the prospect of a possible reconfiguration of China's mental map. This could take the form of a geographic downsizing, either by reverting to the inner concentric circle and focusing efforts and resources on the "minor" rather than the "greater periphery" of China's strategic space or by concentrating on a limited number of "fulcrum" countries that have the greatest strategic value for China, regardless of their geographic proximity, as suggested by

³⁶ See, as examples of enduring extreme mental maps, Wen Tiejun "Luquan zhanlüe 'xichu' dui Zhongguo quyu fazhan de yingxiang" [The Influence of the "Marching Westwards" Land Power Strategy on China's Regional Development], 163.com, September 11, 2022, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/HGUU5E9E0553AM5X.html>; Zhang, "Da bianju beijingxia Zhongguo dui Feizhou de zhanlüe xuqiu"; Li Zhenfu, "Shijie jingji fazhan zhongxin zhuanqi yu 'Beibingyang-Taipingyang shidai' daolai: Jianyu 'Taipingyang shidai' shuo shangting" [Shift of the World Economic Center of Gravity and the Arrival of the "Arctic-Pacific" Age: A Discussion of the "Pacific Era"], People's Forum, September 2022; Thomas des Garets Geddes, "Facing the Global South: Building a New International System by Yang Ping," Sinitication, February 18, 2023, <https://www.sinitication.com/p/facing-the-global-south-building>; Thomas des Garets Geddes and Daniel Crain, "Three Rings: Building a New International System in the Face of Western Decoupling by Cheng Yawen," Sinitication, April 13, 2023, <https://www.sinitication.com/p/three-rings-building-a-new-international>; and Thomas des Garets Geddes, "China's Grand Strategy in Asia and Beyond According to Shi Yuanhua," Sinitication, December 3, 2023, <https://www.sinitication.com/p/chinas-grand-strategy-in-asia-and>.

³⁷ Zhang, "Da bianju beijingxia Zhongguo dui Feizhou de zhanlüe xuqiu"; and Hu and Wang, "Daguo diyuanzhanlüe jiaohuiqu de shikong yanbian." For an examination of efforts to define China's new economic strategic space, see Karen M. Sutter, "China's View of Its Economic Sphere of Influence, Economic Security, and Trading Networks," NBR, Mapping China's Strategic Space, September 2024.

³⁸ Yan Xuetong, "Waijiao zhuanxing, liyi paixu yu daguo jueqi" [Diplomatic Transformation, Interest Prioritization, and the Rise of Great Powers], Sohu, June 14, 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/148761898_99912126.

³⁹ Wang, "Qianxi diyuanzhengzhi bianhua dui guojia anquan zhanlüe de yingxiang."

⁴⁰ Shi Yinhong, "Lun yidai yilu yu Zhongguo zhanlüe" [The Belt and Road Initiative and China's Strategy], *China Review*, November 30, 2023, translation available from CSIS, Interpret: China, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-chinas-strategy>.

Shi Yinhong.⁴¹ Xi Jinping alluded to the imperative to be more selective and deliberate about the deployment of BRI during an August 2018 symposium. He instructed various domestic stakeholders participating in the implementation of the initiative that broad, freestyle brushstrokes, which were preferred in the initial phase of its deployment, should now be abandoned in favor of fine-brush meticulously traced art. Public reports about Xi's speech did not state, however, whether his artistic metaphor referred to prioritizing specific regions, countries, or projects, or instead to refining BRI's methods and standards.⁴²

A reconfiguration could also take the form of a change in conceptual, rather than purely spatial or geographic, perimeters. As noted in the previous chapters, initial domestic discussions about a significantly expanded strategic space coincided with a period during which elites were increasingly confident in China's growing material power. During that phase, the discourse was noticeably dominated by strategists from security and military power centers who promoted the transformation of China into a sea power and the development of a blue water navy to protect its increasingly global interests as well as access to global chokepoints, markets, and resources. Their vision was deeply influenced by classical geopolitical theories and was mostly rendered in geographic projections. Inhibited from advocating actual physical conquest, they resorted to identifying "new frontiers" in spaces that remained unclaimed and free of human presence, where China could still hope to expand. It is possible that this hard-power phase has now begun to transition into, or is being supplemented by, a new phase of execution focused on ideological expansion. The commitment to a quasi-global mental map would remain, but instead of China prioritizing the material power of its external footprint, which is costly in terms of both monetary investments and increased international resistance, the main conduit for overseas influence would now be ideational and civilizational.

This focus on ideological expansion could be the new "intangible" dimension of China's strategic space to which earlier strategic writings referred with no further explanation. After all, the Chinese Communist Party's survival has been its core concern since its foundation, and fears of "foreign hostile forces" relentlessly plotting "color revolutions" and campaigns to coerce the regime to "peacefully evolve" into a democracy are entrenched in the leadership's mindset. The ideological realm is perhaps the dimension in which using the term "vital space" is most appropriate because it touches on the party's deepest existential fears. Having started from a primarily defensive position in this domain, China may be in the process of transitioning into a new phase during which it seeks not only to secure but also to expand its strategic space in the ideological sphere.⁴³ The leadership's 2013 elevation of "discourse power" (*huayuquan*) to the level of a national strategy, along with its desire to build an outward directed "discourse system," illustrates its ambition to shape the international rules and make other international actors endorse its ideology and vision for global governance as legitimate.⁴⁴ That same year, the concept of a "community of shared future for humankind" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*, formerly translated as "community of common destiny") also emerged. The concept has since become the rallying cry of China's global diplomacy. Beneath its banal name lies the Chinese Communist

⁴¹ Shi, "Lun yidai yilu yu Zhongguo zhanlüe." See also Xu Jin et al., "Dazao Zhongguo zhoubian anquan de 'zhanlüe zhidian' guojia" [Building "Strategic Fulcrum" Countries for China's Periphery Security], *World Knowledge* 15 (2014).

⁴² Fan Hengshan, "Tuidong gongjian yidai yilu xiang gao zhiliang fazhan zhuanbian" [Promoting the Transformation of BRI to High-Quality Development], *People's Daily*, October 29, 2018, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1029/c409499-30367473.html>.

⁴³ Nadège Rolland, "China's Counteroffensive in the War of Ideas," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, February 24, 2020.

⁴⁴ Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order."

Party's rejection of "so-called universal values" that vow to protect the individual's fundamental rights against the excessive power of the state.⁴⁵

Today, it is the term "civilization," adopted most recently by the official CCP diplospeak, that catalyzes China's struggle for greater ideological space. This presents a higher-order variant of previous efforts and epitomizes Beijing's rejection of the ideological hegemony of the West and its aspiration to represent a valid, nondemocratic alternative, possibly with broad appeal. In the words of Xi, China's pathway would "break the myth that modernization equals Westernization" and incarnate a "different vision for modernization."⁴⁶ It is not entirely clear whether the "civilization" framing will stop at supporting the narrative that all political systems and ideologies, including authoritarian ones, are equally legitimate, or whether it will be used as a way to eventually assert the superiority of China's governance model, and even its applicability to other nations. More certain, however, is the fact that the CCP leadership will never abandon its quest to increase its own power in all dimensions. In this context, the three global initiatives Xi announced between September 2021 and March 2023, with development, security, and civilization as their main banners, can be understood as the official articulation of an ambitious three-pronged strategy for expanding China's strategic space globally. It has now become imperative to unpack the various facets—including the darkest ones—of the PRC's civilizational discourse, which under Xi has become an increasingly prominent feature of both domestic narratives and external messaging, and to understand the deep implications for the future world order.

⁴⁵ Nadège Rolland, "Examining China's 'Community of Common Destiny,'" *Power* 3.0, January 23, 2018.

⁴⁶ He Zhongguo, "Wei shenme shuo Zhongguo shi xiandaihua dapole 'xiandaihua=xifanghua' de misi" [Why Is It Said That Chinese-Style Modernization Breaks the Myth of "Modernization=Westernization?"], *Study Times*, February 10, 2023, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0210/c40531-32621164.html>.



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